

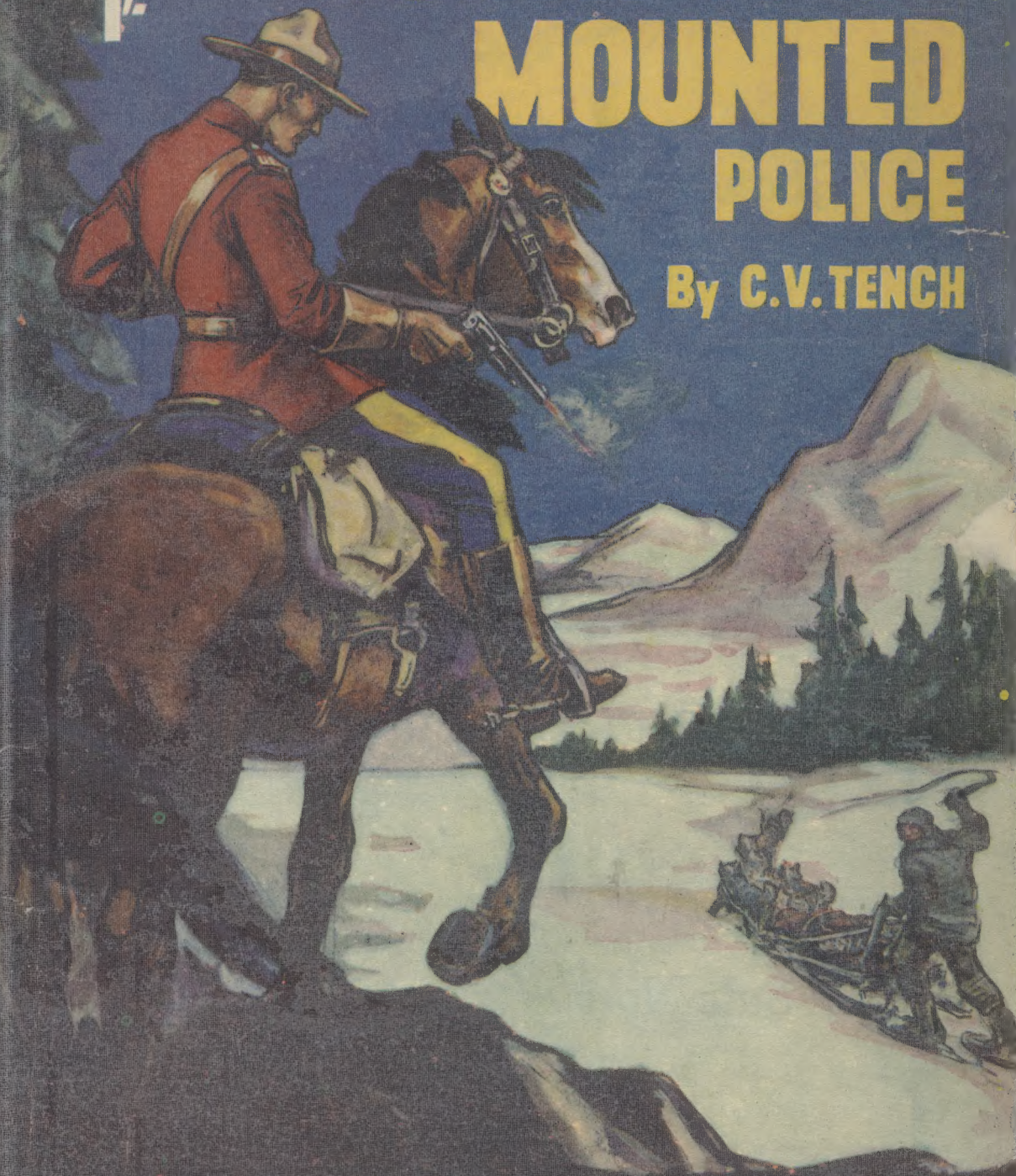
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TALES OF THE

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NORTH-WEST MOUNTED POLICE

By C.V. TENCH



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TALES OF THE NORTH-WEST MOUNTED POLICE

Who Face Unending Hardships in the Pursuit of Duty

By C. V. TENCH

Wilderness Voices

*And Others, Including that of Conscience, Convict
a Criminal*

"SO your partner, running ahead of the team, went through an air-hole in the ice, eh?" Corporal Acton, in charge of the Dease River Post of the R.C.M.P., put the question to the haggard-faced man who, a few minutes before, had turned his weary dogs from the broad, frozen highway of the Mackenzie River, and urged them into compound of the police barracks.

Mountie and traveller now sat facing one another across a table in the living-room. They were alone.

"Yes." The stranger, who had given his name as Chanson, shifted his gaze from the corporal's direct, questioning stare to a window. For tense seconds he gazed out at the scene of bluffs and hollows of blizzard-whirled snow. With a shudder he brought his eyes back to the policeman.

"M'mm!" The young Mountie cleared his throat. "You did the right thing, Chanson, in reporting the accident."

"Yes," Chanson agreed. "I wanted to clear myself before I went any farther. Besides, I've only got three dogs. Two got mauled in a scrap and I had to shoot them. Thought, maybe, you'd sell me a couple."

"Can't do that." Acton was writing as he spoke. "Our dogs are government property. But you'll never make the nine hundred miles to rail-head, at Waterways, with only three animals. Lay over here for a couple of days and I'll send a native to buy you a pair."

The corporal stared at Chanson intently. There was something about the man he could not fathom. Chanson's next words emphasised this.

"Lay over a couple of days?" Chanson was on his feet, his face livid. "Not for anything. Me and Ralston was on our way outside. Now Ralston's gone, but I'm heading out."

"Why the rush to get outside?" Corporal Acton's tone was soothing. In his seven years' residence in the far

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north he had encountered more than one case of wilderness nerves, and saw a case confronting him now.

"Why?" It was almost a scream. "Did you ever see a man drown? Did you ever watch the bubbles? Hear something clawing, clawing underneath the ice?"

The Mountie did not answer. Chanson again turned haunted eyes to the window.

"It's this blasted country that's got me." His voice quavered. "Been up here since last June, I have; ten long months. Ate alive by flies in summer; freeze in winter. What with one thing and another, my nerves is all shot. Listen, Corp, listen to that!" Floating eerily through the stillness came the despairing howl of a wolf. "That's what's getting me, the silence—and the voices!"

"Yes, voices." The Mountie's tone was quiet. "They call this the 'Silent North,' Chanson, but it is never quiet. It is always whispering, telling all it knows."

"Always whispering. Voices." Chanson fumbled nervously at his throat. "I can't stand it any longer. Let's get things finished and let me be on my way."

The corporal nodded. From a drawer he produced a map.

"Show me," he asked, "as nearly as you can, where your companion, Ralston, went through." He marked the spot Chanson indicated, and as he refolded the map, added: "About a three-day mush from here. I'll detail a constable and a native to try and recover the corpse."

"Not much hope." Chanson forced a grin. "The current's got Ralston miles away by now."

"Perhaps." The Mountie nodded. "Now give me a brief history of yourself and Ralston."

"There's not much to tell." Chanson again shifted his gaze. "Last spring I ran across Ralston in Edmonton. He was just a kid with a brand-new mining

degree. I learned he was anxious to head north and do a bit of prospecting. I let him know I was acquainted with the north from Waterways to Aklavik. I also let him know I was broke and out of a job. The up-shot was, his old man stakes him and we headed north. We floated down in a skow.

"Puttered around ever since. Found no minerals worth a damn. Supplies began to run low, so we decided to head outside. Ditched the skow and bought dogs. Now Ralston's gone, but I'm heading for the outside."

THE SEARCH

The corporal wrote busily for several moments, then:

"Of course, Chanson, we can't keep tab on everyone in the north, but it's odd we didn't run across you in ten months."

"Not so funny." Again Chanson avoided the younger man's eyes. "Ralston and me was on the move all the time. Most of the time we was in unsettled country; didn't even see a native."

"I see." Acton again wrote hastily, then: "Well, Chanson, I regret the tragic end to your prospecting, but your story rings true. One trifling formality and you can go."

"Meaning?" The tone was strained. "I must search your person and your sled."

"I was expecting that." Getting to his feet, Chanson commenced emptying his pockets.

"Why?"

"You've got to make sure I've none of Ralston's money or papers on me, eh?"

"This is yours?" The corporal thumb'd a roll of currency.

"Yes. Ralston was green and I soaked him. That's my wages. And, believe me, I earned the money. It's some job looking after a greenhorn."

"Yes," agreed the Mountie. "Now

we'll look over your cariole." He led the way outside.

"Make this sled yourself?" he inquired, a few minutes later, as Chanson was preparing to repack.

"Yes, pretty good job, eh?"

The Mountie did not at once reply, instead he lifted the cariole with one hand and stood weighing it, thoughtfully.

"I admit it's a bit on the heavy side," Chanson went on, "because I had to use birch instead of spruce for the frame, as we was in a barren country. And being shy of a canvas, I used green moose hide for a sheath."

"I see." Corporal Acton dropped the cariole, added: "It's all of twenty pounds heavier than it should be. Chanson, why don't you lay over here until I can get you more dogs?"

"Because to lay over for a couple of days might mean a lay over of two months." Again that haunted look appeared in Chanson's eyes. "And, Corp, you know as well as I do that the ice won't last much longer. If it goes before I hit Waterways I'll have to wait till summer and the opening of navigation. I can't stand that; I want to get outside. My nerves are shot, I tell you."

"I see." The corporal watched the other man closely, noticed his strained attitude, as if the man were looking and listening for that which he dreaded to see or hear. Was Chanson's case just another example of wilderness nerves, or——? Corporal Acton continued to study the man closely even as he spoke.

"I see," the Mountie repeated, and, "Well, Chanson, stop at Johnny Thunderbrow's place, twenty miles along. He's Indian and will sell you dogs on my say so. While you're repacking I'll fix up your O.K. card."

He turned into the building. When he emerged, Chanson was tying the last lashing. The man forced a grin as he took the card from the corporal.

"I guess," he grinned, as he stowed the pasteboard away in a pocket,

"you're using these O.K. cards on account of that affair of three weeks ago."

"What affair?" Acton was all policeman; his tone curt.

"Why——" Chanson shuffled uneasily. "Indian agent shot and his cash taken."

"How did you hear about it?" Acton's gaze was piercing.

"Well, Corp," Chanson grinned, "a little while ago you said something about the north always whispering. To get dogs we had to find a native camp. They were sore and told us. Said the Treaty Indian money had been stolen and they'd have to wait a long time for more to come from Ottawa."

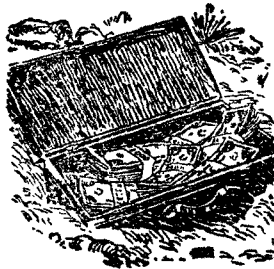
"True enough." Acton's tone was curt. "But with the O.K. card you'll be able to get through to Edmonton without further trouble. You'll not be questioned or searched further by any of our fellows."

"That's what I figured." Chanson picked up the dog-whip. "Remember I told you I've been up in this country before. Now I won't be bothered further by any Mounties."

"Have I 'bothered' you?"

"No, Corp, you've been easy; and I've got my O.K. card." A grin accompanied the words, followed by a command to the dogs.

THE MURDERED AGENT



Until a bend in the river hid Chanson and his outfit from view, Corporal Acton stood staring after him. Wilderness nerves!

The grit of life in the Far North occasioned that in many men. And Chanson had had the additional shock of seeing his sole companion disappear, with a last gasp—

ing, choking plea for help, through an air-hole in the ice!

The Far North! Acton sucked in a shivering breath as he thought of it. He had put in seven long years of it now, and this year he was slated for six months' furlough. And outside a girl awaited him; a girl worthy of a man who had given the best years of his youth in helping to uphold the traditions of the Mounted.

Further, he had been promised promotion and a post on a railroad. He would not have to bring his bride into the white wastes.

Then had come the agent's case. Right in his district the agent had been killed and the Treaty money stolen. It was up to Corporal Acton to clear up the case. He could not expect furlough until he had done so. Yet not one clue had he to go upon.

The thieving killer had craftily awaited the aid of the elements. Had waited until the agent's natives had left camp to hunt for fresh meat. Then, under cover of a blizzard, had crept close, shot the agent dead, stolen the money and a dog-team, and then vanished, his trail obliterated by the storm-swirled snow.

As to Constable Greenwood, the agent's guard, he also had vanished. Returning to camp hours later the natives had found but one dog team left and the agent's corpse. They had reported at once to Corporal Acton. Since then the corporal and another two men of his detachment had been working frenziedly.

A clamour of confusing voices engulfed the Mountie as, still mentally reviewing the case and thinking about Chanson, he turned to enter the barracks. Whispering voices that came from within, voices which mocked and questioned. Real voices that came from without, as the wild things commenced their evening chorus. Listening, Acton tried to shut out all but the voice of reason, the one voice that could help

him bring a murderer and robber to justice.

"I hate to order you to try and recover Ralston's corpse." Corporal Acton addressed Constable McCannell, at breakfast. "Especially," he added, "as we're needing every available man to round up the agent's murderer."

"I'll make it fast," replied McCannell. "I'll take Henri and a spare team and be back inside a week. And Mullett, the third of our detachment, should be back any day. That'll leave you free to hit the trail again."

"Yes, Mac, and I'm heading out as soon as Mullet gets back." Pushing his plate to one side, the corporal continued: "Ever since the agent was killed we've had every native on the hunt and been doing forced patrols ourselves. Results, none."

"I favour only two ways of clearing up a baffling crime. One is to follow the tiniest clue. In this case there is none. The other way is to reason out a hypothetical case and work backwards. I laid awake half the night trying to follow the murderer's line of reasoning."

"I listened to the wolves, the dogs, the wind, the sifting of the snow," Acton went on, his eyes alight with intense thought; "and I knew, Mac, that I couldn't stay here if wilderness voices were my only company—if they were insistently reminding me that I'd left a man lying in the snow with a bullet-hole in his head, and I had fired that bullet!"

"M'mm!" Constable McCannell regarded his superior respectfully. The corporal went on.

"Mac, they say that murderers and their ilk head for the open spaces. Do they? I wonder. Mac, only men with clear consciences can stand solitude. I'll prove it. If you had it on your conscience that you had murdered a man in cold blood, what would you crave?"

"Why——" The constable stared, then: "Why, good Lor', Acton, the one thing I'd crave would be crowds, lights, liquor, anything to make me forget."

Anything, rather than this solitude."

"Exactly." The corporal nodded, his eyes aglow. "Mac, I was out on patrol when the agent went through; you checked him in and out. How much would the Treaty cash he carried weigh, d'you suppose?"

"Weigh?" McCannell's ruddy features reflected amazement, then he leaned forward intensely. "Corporal, the agent had four money parcels, each containing twenty-five thousand dollars in one-, two-, and five-dollar notes. Authorised by the Indian Department at Ottawa, the parcels were shipped by special registered mail from an Edmonton bank to the post office at McMurray, where the agent took them over. The agent told me that the postage rate on bank money parcels is five cents per ounce. There was four dollars and eighty cents postage on each package, that means——" he figured with pencil and paper—"the four parcels weighed twenty-four pounds.

"Thanks!" The corporal's tone was tense. "And, Mac, if you killed a man to get that hundred thousand, what would you do?"

"Head outside. Blow it. Try and forget, with fast living, the man I had killed."

"Exactly." The corporal nodded his agreement. "We've two wireless stations up here, one farther north, at Simpson, the other south, at Smith. They're eight hundred miles apart. Even a fast runner couldn't do that distance in less than twelve days. Within three days, Simpson had broadcast the agent's case.

"Since then, every traveller, white or native, heading outside, has been halted and searched and thoroughly checked over before being given an O.K. card to proceed. Yet no trace has been found of around twenty-five pounds weight of currency. What's the answer?"

McCannell shook his head. Acton went on:

"Either the killer is hiding farther north, which a man used to this country wouldn't do, because he'd know that sooner or later a patrol would locate him, or he's heading south. Once outside he'd start to spend as he'd feel safe."

"But," protested McCannell, "with our close checking of travellers, and no other way out but by the river, how's he to get outside? He'd never be allowed to board the weekly train at Waterways without one of our O.K. cards."

"No; but he could have obtained one." Acton pounded the table with his fist. "What I've figured out is this. The killer was an experienced northerner. Hiding the money, he called at one of our posts and obtained an O.K. card, then again picked up the money and headed south."

"Sounds all right—in theory." McCannell commenced to fill his pipe. "But travelling on the river a man can see others a long way away. No clues. Even though you suspect a killer, proving it is a different matter. In this case, Corporal, you've got but one way of proving who killed the agent; that is, by finding the money in his possession.

"I agree that the murderer, right now, is no doubt somewhere between here and rail-head, but how are you going to catch him and prove his guilt?"

"By deduction and hypothesis. In the only way possible because of the absence of tangible clues." Again the corporal pounded the table. "As soon as Mullett gets in, I'm taking a fast team and heading for the outside."

"A hunch?"

"Perhaps. A hunch; guesswork; hypothetical reasoning, or—wilderness voices." Acton's tone dropped to a whisper.

"Tell me more." McCannell's tone was pleading.

"No, Mac, I won't. If my hunch fails there'll be an enquiry, and I'd like you to be clear. If it wins, then"—Acton's eyes glowed dreamily—"it

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means promotion and a cushy post."

His manner suddenly became brisk.

"Whether you recover Ralston's body or not, wireless me the result to Waterways. This patrol will take you into new country, so keep Henri working, and don't forget the agent—and Constable Greenwood."

"You think Greenwood——?" began McCannell.

"Greenwood and a dog team disappeared," was the curt response. "Get started, McCannell."

An hour later, Corporal Acton was watching Constable McCannell and the Indian, Henri, together with two teams, toiling slowly up-river.

As he turned back into the building wilderness voices were whispering to him, urging him to obey their dictates. For life in the Far North is raw, men are governed by fundamentals. The same laws would control the murderer's actions. And as he listened, the corporal decided to meet risk with risk; combat cunning with cunning.

RACING THE THAW

"Good Lord—Acton!" Sergeant Watts, in charge of the Waterways detachment, jerked to his feet and held out a welcoming hand as the corporal flung wearily into the room.

"Yes, Acton." The younger man grasped the outstretched hand then sank into a chair. "Detail a man to attend to my team, Watts. We're all in. Just finished nine hundred miles in twenty-seven days. Been racing the thaw."

"Good Lord!" Sergeant Watts opened the door at his elbow and belated orders into the living-room, then turned again to the corporal. "But why not take a plane?"

"Aeroplane?" Acton's voice was harsh. "You know as well as I this is 'tween seasons. They're not operating. Ice unsafe for wheels or skis; too much ice for pontoons."

"That's right," the sergeant agreed, "and——?"

"Got a wireless for me?"

"Yes." The sergeant opened a drawer in the desk. "It came some time ago. Although addressed to you, I read it. Can't make a thing out of it. Please explain." He extended a type-written sheet.

Eagerly Acton read:

"Have found both Ralston and Greenwood. Matter urgent. Henri on your heels with papers."

"McCannell."

"Henri on my heels." Acton addressed the sergeant. "Best runner in the north. Can do seventy a day. Bet he'll be here by to-morrow."

"What's it all about?" Sergeant Watts's eyes were wide.

"The agent's case," was the reply. "No clues. Only way out for me was hypothetical reconstruction of case and subsequent action of guilty party. That's why I'm here."

"But——"

"Ice due to break any day," the corporal interrupted. "Culprit, if trying to get outside, is now here in Waterways awaiting weekly train, or will arrive shortly. If not here, is heading farther north, that means we can pen him in. Is that right?"

"Yes," agreed the sergeant, "but——"

"Watts, old man," the corporal stopped him, "I'm all in. Let me sleep until Henri arrives, then I'll explain further."

For a space the sergeant stared at the drawn features of the younger man, then led the way into another room and helped the corporal to undress and climb into a bunk.

"Rouse out, Acton, your Indian's here!" Sergeant Watts shook the sleeping corporal.

"Eh? What time is it?" Acton sat up.

"Seven-thirty, evening," was the

answer. "You've slept for twenty-two hours."

Thirty minutes later, shaved and dressed, Corporal Acton was confronting Henri.

Eagerly he perused the note the native handed to him, then glanced swiftly through a small, water-stained book. Then addressed the sergeant.

"Watts, can a man be convicted on his own confession?"

"Eh? Yes—I mean no. Say, what the——?" The sergeant was surprised into coherence. "Good Lord, Acton, I'm not a blessed mind-reader, but if a suspected man makes statements that can be substantiated, then we win a conviction."

"Then I win." The corporal waved note and book. "All we now have to do is to find the money. We've found the remains of Ralston and also the guard, Greenwood. But Greenwood isn't dead."

"Greenwood is important," Watts answered, "but who is Ralston?"

Rapidly, Acton explained, at the same time handing over the note and book. Watts scanned them.

"So," the sergeant said, "all we have to do is to find the money and get a confession. A confession from whom?"

"The man who's got the cash."

"But——"

The corporal silenced him and turned to the native. "Your story, Henri," he said, curtly.

HENRI'S STORY



The Indian began.

"Constable McCannell an' me mush hard t'ree days. Fin' place where Ralston s'posed to drown. All

bunk. River 'im froze clear to bottom. Few miles farther we fin' deserted camp. Old trail lead from t'ere. We follow.

"Jus' 'bout dark we hit Dismal Lake. Dogs, hungry, scratch on ice. Mak' camp an' I cut hole in ice to get fish for dogs. Line catch on somet'ing. I pull. Bring up dead man.

"McCannell come when I yell. He look at dead man an' say 'im Ralston.

"T'en we 'ear funny laugh. T'ere ol' Crazy Ann, who live always by Dismal Lak'. She tak' look at dead man t'en sing a song. T'ree, mebbe four days afore she see dead man pushed t'rough ice by bigger white man. Ann keep singin'. We follow when she go away. At her camp we fin' Constable Greenwood, bugs as 'ell with wound in 'ead."

As the native paused, the two policemen exchanged significant glances. They knew well of the old squaw known as Crazy Ann who lived on the shores of Dismal Lake, and knew that other natives avoided her.

Henri went on.

"Ann still talk. Say she fin' Constable Greenwood walkin' 'cross lak' in storm. We know she be good to sic' man so leave 'im t'ere with more grub. Constable McCannell tak' one team an' head for Simpson to send wireless. Send me 'ere with message." He grinned, then: "I have money. Lik' to 'ave a good time in Waterways."

"You've earned it, Henri," Corporal Acton dismissed him with, then turned to the sergeant.

"Watts, things are coming our way. Let's try and decipher this."

Together, they read:

"H. J. Ralston,
"Edmonton, Alberta.
"(His diary)"

Passing over the first pages that dealt only with the journey to the north, the policemen bent eagerly over an entry made but a few weeks before. the young man's death.

"After absence of several days to procure dogs and cariole, Chanson returned to camp last night. Shots and flames awakened me in middle of night. Saw Chanson burning cariole and two dead dogs. Chanson had shot dogs. Said dogs were badly mauled in team-fight. Said sled was too heavy and he would make another one."

"M'mm!" Acton glanced at the sergeant, then again pored over the small book.

"Chanson busy all day making new sled. Using a green moose hide although we have a spare canvas. Questioned him, but he evaded my questions. Don't trust him. He is agreeable to pulling out, but says we must first journey to Dismal Lake to procure fish for dogs."

"A fishing trip to Dismal Lake." Acton pushed the diary to one side. "It looks, Watts, as if we shall have to arrest Chanson."

"But why should he have murdered his partner?" Watts stared at the corporal. "Chanson seems all right. He reported here, showed me your O.K. card, then took a room at the Water-front Hotel. In fact," he added, "after he had turned his dogs loose, I helped him to carry his sled up to his room."

"Which all fits in with my hunch," the corporal replied. "But there's no need to rush over right away and arrest Chanson. The weekly train won't be leaving for two days."

"But what's this to do with the agent's case? It's a separate crime?" the sergeant protested.

"Perhaps," the younger man agreed. "But my idea of being here, Watts, is to catch the man who killed the agent and obtain enough proof to convict him. What's the only proof left to us?"

"Why, the money! Find it in his possession," was the startled rejoinder.

"Exactly," Acton nodded. "I hope

to do that, and I need your help."

"What's your plan?" Watts snapped.

"Wilderness voices! Voices!" Corporal Acton's own voice quivered. "The voices of the north, the voice of conscience, the voice of fear. Voices, real and unreal."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated the sergeant, then: "What d'you want me to do?"

"Just this," said Acton, and, leaning forward, outlined his plan.

VOICE OF THE WIRELESS

The large sitting-room of the Water-front Hotel was packed, as, followed by a constable, Sergeant Watts entered. Many heads turned to smile and voice a greeting to the well-liked Mounties, but one head turned and then turned away, as if its owner did not seek recognition.

Music throbbed from a large radio at the far end of the room. The two policemen settled themselves in chairs, as if having no other object in view than to enjoy the evening broadcast.

Abruptly the music ceased as the manager of the hotel fiddled with the controls. Turning, he addressed the crowd.

"Fellows, I've just been told that they've installed a microphone at Simpson, from now on they'll be talking their messages instead of sending them in Morse. Maybe it's all bunk, but I'm tuning in to try and get 'em. Here she comes," he warned.

A clear voice emanated from the machine.

"Police post at Fort Simpson speaking, offering information to hand regarding the murder and robbery of Indian Agent Peterson.

"Constable Greenwood, the guard, has been found. He had been shot and left for dead by the thief. We know for certain that the murderer is now at Waterways awaiting train. We also know where he has concealed the money. All are asked to aid us in apprehending him."

Sergeant Watts and the constable waited to hear no more, for suddenly they spied a man sneaking, furtively, towards the stairway. Keeping out of his view they quietly followed. Saw the man open a door and disappear.

With a sign to the constable to do the same, Sergeant Watts drew his revolver. Then he turned swiftly as a hand touched his arm.

"It worked." The speaker was Corporal Acton. "Give him a few minutes to start changing his hiding-place."

In tense silence the three policemen waited, then—

"Open! In the name of the Law!" As he spoke, Acton shoved his comrades roughly to one side. And barely in time, for, accompanied by staccato barks, a handful of bullets crashed through the flimsy door.

Corporal Acton replied by firing twice, shattering the lock. As the door swung open, in plain view, stood Chanson, trying, frenziedly, to insert a fresh clip of shells in his automatic.

"Drop it!" Acton's tone showed that he meant it. The man obeyed. In a trice the handcuffs were on his wrists.

"I win." Corporal Acton swung on the sergeant as the constable guarded the prisoner. "Look!" He bent and finished the task Chanson had been interrupted at; tore apart the sled's double sheathing of moose-hide, revealing hundreds of brand-new bank-notes. He went on:

"After this man had left my post I puzzled over why he had not let me have a new sled made for him, and other matters. Looking again at the map I remembered that the spot he marked was always frozen solid in winter. I recalled how heavy his cariole was. Again, I recalled that the agent had used a police team and a native team. When the Indians brought in the agent's body, they had a mixed team; three of our dogs and two of their own.

"Chanson hit my post using three dogs instead of five. Yet he had money. Why had he avoided natives

from whom he could have bought animals? Yet, although he'd avoided natives, he knew all about the agent's case. All these things hit me the night after I'd let him go. But, even then, it was only conjecture.

"On my way in I doped out a way to find him with the goods. The finding of Ralston's body and diary was a stroke of luck. The two bigger dogs he shot were police dogs. He knew he'd never get out with them." He swung on Chanson, who, his face ashen with fear, stood staring in horrified fascination.

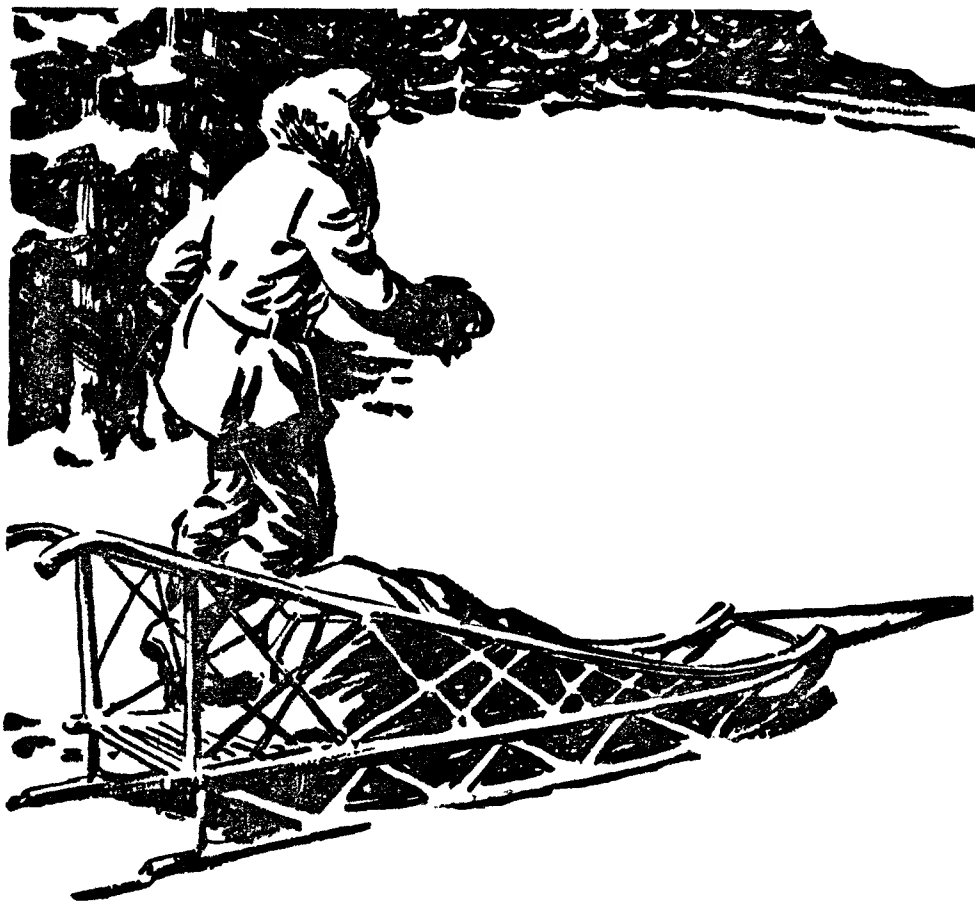
"Voices, wilderness voices, have told us everything. Hitching a team to a sled after you'd killed the agent you mixed the dogs. Greenwood awoke, you fired, saw him fall. Your partner got wise when you shot two dogs and burned a cariole at your camp. You drowned him in Dismal Lake. Not only does the wilderness see all, it tells all. We have an eye-witness to your murder of Ralston. Remember how he pleaded with you? Can't you hear him yet?"

"Stop!" Chanson's voice was a scream. "I admit it all. I still hear Ralston's voice. But I had to kill him.

"But that voice on the radio." He stared with fear-distended eyes. "Where did that voice come from? I've been hearing voices for so long that last voice cracked me, yet I know there's no talking radio north of here. Where'd it come from? How'd you trap me?"

"Bluff!" Corporal Acton's eyes and tone were grim. "I only guessed where you had concealed the money. I had no authority to rip your sled to pieces, so I spoke through a length of tubing leading into the radio. I added my voice to the weight of the voice of your conscience—and the voices of the wilderness—to frighten you into trying to remove the money from its hiding-place. Anything to say?"

Chanson shook his head. The corporal signed to the constable to take the prisoner away.



The Silent Witness

The Sergeant, the Constable and the Native

AS Constable Trent rushed into the compound, Sergeant Nolan, in charge of the R.C.M.P. post at Bear Bluffs, emerged from the barracks to meet him. Brief greetings exchanged, the two men bent to the task of unhitching and feeding the dogs and unloading the cariole.

As he worked, the sergeant studied the constable closely, wondered if the arduous patrol had placed that strained look upon the constable's face, or if it

was something else. But that could wait; he restrained his curiosity until later, waited until Trent had eaten a meal, and turned to face him across the glowing stove.

"Tough trip?" The sergeant removed his pipe, eyed the younger man closely.

"Damned tough." Trent leaned back wearily in his seat. "The first week it was thawing, and that made for heavy going. The last two weeks it's been



snowing and blowing and colder'n ever."

The sergeant nodded.

"These three-week patrols are no cinch," he agreed; added: "See any game? Bag any fresh meat?"

Trent's lips twitched.

"Saw a moose, but didn't get him." He extended his right hand; the sergeant started as he saw that the index finger was swollen and red. Trent explained. "I was mug enough to touch my carbine trigger with my bare finger—and the temperature around forty below." Again he smiled slightly. "It burned me, as you see, and spoiled my aim."

Nolan grunted.

"You'll learn to respect the cold in time," he said. "However, anything much to report?"

"Yes." The strained lines on the constable's face deepened. "Usual routine stuff and one serious occur-

rence; I found that old trapper you asked me to call on, dead."

"Eh?" Nolan started violently, leaned forward. "You mean Bresson, of Big Lake? How'd he die? Where's the body?"

"He was shot through the head." Trent spoke slowly, shifted his gaze from the sergeant's direct, questioning stare to a window, his eyes haunted, as if visualising the scene. "The body is lying exactly as I found it; it'll keep this weather. Besides"—he swung to face Nolan—"I couldn't bring it in with only the one team and my cariote already overloaded, could I?"

"No." The sergeant's tone was quiet; he was watching Trent closely, eyeing his worn features. "Especially with one of your animals running dead lame. It must have jarred you, though. Give me full particulars."

In a flat tone Trent began, spoke jerkily.

"Mushed up to Bresson's place two days ago, just after dark. No light showing, so opened the door and lighted a lamp. Gad! I got the shock then—he was lying flat on his back on the floor—his eyes, wide open, reflected the light. He seemed to be grinning at my horror." He broke off, his eyes haunted; resumed:

"Sounds bad, Sergeant, but the sight of a dead man has always upset me. I pulled myself together after a few moments and examined him. He was stone dead and his body frozen rigid, proof that he must have been dead for some days. I then ransacked the cabin and discovered clues that show he committed suicide."

EVIDENCE

Getting to his feet, the constable strode over to where the cariole's load had been dumped on the floor. After fumbling for a few minutes he placed on the table a small metal cash-box, a nickel-plated revolver of cheap make, a small memorandum book, and a torn, discoloured sheet of paper.

"The pistol was lying close to the body," he explained. "The box and the notebook were on the table on top of the note. I could find no other writing in the shack or on the body—letters or anything—and the entries in this book are of no consequence; just scribbled details about his work any man might make; but the writing seems similar to the note which proves the suicide. Read the note," he ended.

Now a policeman thoroughly absorbed in the job on hand, Nolan first examined the revolver.

"One shot fired," he observed. "M'm!" He picked up the note. "Paper discoloured from exposure, edges nibbled by mice. M'm! Proof that it was written several days ago." He scanned it first, then read it aloud, fully conscious of the constable's intense stare:

"I am sick, old and lonesome. I am going to shoot myself.

"I have no friends, so leave all to the Mounties.

"L. R. Bresson."

"Now compare them." As the sergeant finished, Trent thrust the open memorandum book in front of his eyes. "See?" His tone was eager. "The handwriting is the same."

"Only an expert could be certain of that." Nolan's tone was curt. "We mustn't jump to conclusions."

"Well, examine this." Trent tapped the cash-box, his tone still anxious. Opening the box, the sergeant thumbed the small wad of currency it contained, with an effort he concealed a start; commented:

"Five hundred dollars, eh?"

Then, reclosing the box, he turned and faced the constable, was about to tell him what he had learned when the constable cut in afresh:

"Now you're positive it's suicide, eh?" There was an edge to his tone. "Would a killer have left behind five hundred dollars?"

The remark and the drawn features checked Nolan. No, he must go slowly, must not even tell Trent that the mute evidence upon the table proved conclusively that Bresson had been killed and robbed. Further, the evidence hinted that the deed had been committed by someone not on intimate terms with the dead man, possibly by a newcomer to the district, and——

"Trent, you are a green man." A sudden wave of anger against the constable for carelessly accepting Bresson's death as suicide made Nolan's voice rasp. Trent winced beneath the harsh tone. His eyes hard, the sergeant went on.

"They sent you up here to take the place of Martin when he was knifed in that native brawl. You never met Bresson when he was alive, did you?" Trent shook his head. "Then let me tell you this." Nolan bit off the words.

"Bresson was born and bred up here, he made good money cutting wood for the river steamers and by trapping. Why, in heaven, should he have committed suicide?"

"Why——" Trent licked his lips nervously. "But the note explains that, doesn't it? The old man was despondent, it seems."

"So it seems," Nolan repeated slowly, then: "Where did the bullet enter the head?"

"Almost exactly between the eyes."

"Powder burns?" Nolan's eyes were still hard.

"I—I didn't notice."

"Didn't notice?"

Then, with an effort, Nolan checked himself. To rage at the constable for his carelessness would do no good. Staring at him and seeing the drawn features and haunted eyes, the sergeant felt a measure of compassion for the younger man. It had been his first lengthy patrol alone. He had stumbled across a corpse. He had admitted that the shock had unnerved him. And the sergeant was suddenly aware that already a suspicion was floating vaguely in the mists at the back of his mind; already he was conning over the handful of white men in his district, was mentally commencing the process of examination and elimination.

The constable cut into his thoughts.

"Perhaps I've been a bit careless, Sergeant, but I'm not an old hand like you."

Still staring at him, Nolan deliberately lied.

"No, I don't think you're careless, Trent; I think it's just an open-and-shut suicide case." He paused, tugging at his ear, added:

"Anyway, we must fetch the body. You've just finished a tough patrol, so, as Pierre'll be back in the morning, I'll take him and two teams and mush down to get it." Again he paused, his brain now thoroughly at grips with the case, went on:

"You know Morson, over at Ghost

Creek, don't you?" The constable nodded. "Well, get word to him of this happening; he'll probably be able to help us straighten things out."

"What he's to do with it?"

"He bached with the dead man all last winter," Nolan explained. "Then they had a quarrel and Morson pulled out. No one could stick Bresson for long; he was a cranky, mean old cuss. But that's none of our business. Our duty is to see that the deceased is accorded decent burial and his affairs straightened out."

Trent nodded. "That shouldn't be hard, eh? A simple suicide case."

The remark again aroused Nolan's resentment. He could have cursed the constable for calmly accepting the killing as suicide. Was it genuine carelessness on Trent's part, or laziness, or was the constable aware of his suspicions? Nolan thought furiously, turned and stared at the articles upon the table; the clues prompted him to a definite plan of action. He gave another order.

"And besides getting in touch with Morson, while I am away make out a full report in writing. Also copy the note and the entries in the diary."

"Can't do that." Trent held up his right hand. As he eyed the swollen finger, Nolan mentally cursed. His first move had been check-mated.

CLEARING THE TRAIL



Two days later Sergeant Nolan swung his dogs off the ice and up the river bank, Pierre, the native helper, right behind him. Men and animals drew

to a steaming halt in front of Bresson's

cabin. Bidding the Indian remain outside, the sergeant pushed open the door and entered. The faint light showed him an inert form sprawled upon the floor. Briskly, he commenced a thorough investigation.

At the end of thirty minutes he had learned all that the shack and its grim, silent occupant could teach him. His face set in stern lines, he strode outside. A thoughtful frown on his face, he gazed about him.

To the north was Big Lake, a treacherous expanse of wind-swept ice rarely travelled in winter-time; east and south, heavy timber made overland travel with a dog-team practically impossible. To the west was the real highway of the district, the frozen river. The sergeant hazarded that any visitor the dead man might have had had arrived from that destination. Re-entering the shack, he emerged armed with broom and shovel. A curt order to the native, and both men commenced clearing away the snow that had fallen since the last thaw, working from the doorway of the shack.

Approaching darkness was threatening to end the work when the Indian grunted words that caused Nolan to straighten up and stare; Pierre was sweeping vigorously along a given line, uncovering what Nolan had hoped to find—the tracks of a man and dog-team made during the thaw of two weeks ago. The return of colder weather had frozen the tracks solid. Pausing in his labours, the Indian encountered the policeman's stare.

"How you know someone call'ere w'en snow soft?" he asked.

Sergeant Nolan nodded towards the shack.

"I think he has been dead just about two weeks."

Pierre's eyes widened; his voice was hushed.

"You t'ink someone kill 'im?"

"Eh?" Nolan stared at the Indian. Pierre was highly intelligent, he knew, had helped him to clear up several

cases. Then Nolan recalled his one hope of trapping the killer lay in keeping his own knowledge to himself. His answer was curt.

"I don't think so, but tracks on the cabin floor showed he had a visitor just before he died. Tell me if that caller was native or white; how many dogs he was driving."

The Indian dropped to his hands and knees, crawled along the narrow pathway he had cleared. He beckoned the trooper to his side.

"White man, see, wearin' boots 'count of wet snow. 'E turn'um feet out, not in, like my people. Drivin' five dogs all wearin' moccasins so's wet snow don't mak'um feet sore. W'ile team wait outside one dog chew'um shoe off. 'Ere it is." He handed to the sergeant the buckskin pawgear his keen eyes had discovered; added: "T'at mean, sergeant, one dog 'e run on t'ree legs soon after. Fella musta been in 'urry not to notice t'at, eh?"

Nolan nodded, even as he turned the dog-shoe over in his hand. Thoughts he found unpleasant were crowding into his brain. Trent had driven a five-dog team, and one of the animals had been lamed. Trent would have worn boots during the soft spell. Trent was new to the north, and although Bresson's killer might not be a newcomer, Nolan knew that he had not been well acquainted with the dead man.

It was unthinkable, yet—Nolan recalled the constable's distraught attitude, his eagerness to prove the case was one of suicide. Was that occasioned by Trent's anxiety to show how he had handled his first serious case, coupled to the nerve-strain of lonely days on the trail and the shock of stumbling across a dead man?

Long service in the Mounted had made Nolan steel code to the core. The muscles of his face quivered. The odd outsider slipped into the uniform he knew, but it seemed too obvious. Still,

he could easily prove it if his suspicions were correct.

Other thoughts crowded into his mind. Green though he was, Trent should not have overlooked clues that the shack and corpse had provided, signs that proved positively that Bresson had been shot. And then there was Trent's injured finger. It was common enough for men in that boreal atmosphere to absently touch metal with bare hands and suffer painful burns in consequence, and the constable was as eager as himself for fresh meat. The sight of a moose could easily have caused him to forget the cold, strip off the mitten and glove from his right hand.

But that injured finger meant a lot. Nolan recalled his last order to Trent. He could prove nothing until the finger healed; then he might prove that the hurt had been suffered not when Trent had fired his carbine, but when he had loosed a hurried shot from his heavy service pistol, and the vicious recoil of the weapon had done the damage. Or Trent might have deliberately frozen his finger to stall for more time in case his plans miscarried.

WILD VOICES

The voices of the wild things jerked Nolan from his thoughts; he mentally shook himself, realised that he was letting his imagination run away with him. Staring about him, he noticed that darkness had fallen; that the Indian had attended to the dogs and was standing quietly watching him. Beckoning to the native to follow, the sergeant strode into the shack. As he sighted the body, Pierre's eyes grew round; hastily he crossed himself, then helped to lift the corpse on to a bunk and cover it with a blanket. As the native busied himself preparing a meal, Nolan sat down and continued to ponder the matter.

Was the visitor who had worn boots

the killer? The sergeant hazarded that he was, for the dead man had not been well liked, had had few callers. Morson, perhaps called occasionally on his erstwhile partner, but he and members of the northern patrols would about comprise the men on Bresson's visiting list.

But although the killer had shown he was no ignorant fool by the way he had faked the suicide, he had made one blunder that would certainly convict him once apprehended. And that error eliminated Morson, for he would have known better than to have made it. Or would he? Nolan frowned over the problem.

And the sergeant felt certain that the killer was still in the district. Had he left it to chance for his crime to be discovered, cut and run for it, then he would certainly have been picked up before he reached railhead, all of nine hundred miles of arduous dog-team travel away.

Nolan felt confident that the killer had adopted what he thought was the safest plan, was still carrying on at his usual work, was laying low, awaiting favourable opportunity, such as the general exodus in the spring to make his way outside, knowing that a check-up of residents showing him missing now would result in suspicion and his speedy apprehension. Nolan's lips twitched; that was one factor in his favour.

Pierre interrupted as he placed food upon the table; told the sergeant to draw up his chair.

"I t'ink it green fella who made t'em boot-tracks, by cripes! No fella much travels w'en wet, eh?" He munched for a few minutes; added: "'Less, mebbe, it's some fella like a Mountie gotta travel any weather." Nolan's answer was a grunt. Pierre went on:

"We easy find fella who made t'em tracks, t'ough. I cut'um some loose an' take'um back to post. T'ey stay froze till spring. W'en you bring in man you t'ink did killin' we fit 'is shoes to

tracks." He grinned pleasedly, and again the sergeant grunted. Then:

"I'm not saying that the man who wore boots kill——" He checked himself abruptly, stared at the Indian. Pierre grinned afresh.

"I savvy, Sergeant, t'at you t'ink someone kill ol' man. We fin' on'y one lotta tracks; too much snow since to fin' more. If fella who made t'em tracks not the killer, t'en you outa luck, eh?"

"Maybe." Nolan nodded slowly. "But I want to find out who it was called on Bresson during the thaw. Your idea is good, so we'll do that, take tracks back with us."

When later he eased his tired body into his sleeping-bag, thoughts of Pierre's scheme again entered the sergeant's mind. Fit boots to tracks. Other remarks made by the native jumped into his full consciousness:

"I t'ink it green fella who made t'em tracks—one dog 'e run on t'ree legs—no fella travels w'en wet, 'less it's some fella like Mountie."

The darkness hid the grim lines on Nolan's face as he stared before him. He had to find the man who had killed Bresson; the task now seemed easy—but the knowledge brought only bitterness.

A BAD SLIP



Darkness had already fallen when, two days later, Sergeant Nolan sighted the lights twinkling from the post. Usually, when returning from a patrol, the rays gleaming from the barracks cheered him, but now they only emphasised the bitterness of his thoughts. He had mentally

reviewed every tiny incident during the return journey, and each clue he had discovered, pointed like a tiny finger of fate, in the same direction as its fellows.

Nolan gritted his teeth, urged the dogs to faster gait; the sooner it was done with, the better. He meant to act directly, drive straight to the point. He was not anticipating a pleasant scene.

Panting yelps, hoarse curses and commands, and Mountie, Indian and dogs rushed into the compound.

"Attend to the animals, but don't touch the loads." With the command the sergeant paused for a moment to draw in a deep breath, then strode into the building.

"Want to talk to you, Trent." He halted just inside the door, even as the constable was pulling on furs to emerge and help with the unhitching. Slipping out of his own parka, the sergeant walked over to a shelf, picked up the pistol the constable had brought back from Bresson's cabin. He turned to the constable:

"I'm supposed to be a good man with a pistol—watch." Aiming rapidly, he fired at a calendar at the far end of the room. Ignoring the constable's startled exclamation, Nolan examined the target. "Yet, Trent, I missed."

He paused, coughed from the acrid fumes that filled the room, then wheeling swiftly, confronted the constable, noting his strained expression.

"This is a cheap pistol, Trent; it doesn't shoot straight. Also, it is a .32. I doubt if it hits hard enough to kill a man. See?" He turned again to the target. "It hardly penetrated at all." Swiftly he dug the bullet free, tossed it upon the table. From a pocket he produced another piece of lead, held it out:

"Trent, here is the bullet that killed Bresson; it is a .38, the same bore as our service revolvers. I dug it out of a log in Bresson's cabin, where it had embedded itself *after passing through Bresson's head*. Anything to say?"

"Good God!" Trent's face blanched. "This by-play, then, is——" He broke

off, licked his lips. "You mean that Bresson was *murdered*? That I fell down on the job?"

"Yes." Nolan's eyes were boring into the constable's. "And the man who shot Bresson also fell down on the job, fell down badly. He hasn't a chance in the world of getting away with it; he might just as well give himself up and save dragging things along."

"You—you have other proof?" Trent's face was livid.

"Yes." Nolan felt taken aback; he had expected more. Came a savage impulse to force Trent's hand; common sense counselled restraint. He must not yet reveal his complete case. Staring at the constable's white face, he ticked off a few points.

"I know that Bresson never banked his money, know his reason for not doing so. His habit was to let Martin or me check his hoard over for him, but as he was a distrustful sort of character, I doubt very much if he ever showed his money to other than a member of the Mounted. The last time I visited him he had over four thousand dollars in cold cash in his shack; you bring back only five hundred. Where's the rest?" Nolan bit off the last three words.

"Why——" Trent passed a shaking hand over his face. "I guess the killer got it. I have slipped badly. Murder, and I thought it was suicide."

"And the killer slipped badly," was the grim reply. "Also, he did not know Bresson very well. And, Trent, he used a .38 calibre gun, as I told you before."

"But the note?" Trent's tone was that of a man clutching at a straw.

"Perhaps written to gain time. He perhaps wrote that under the menace of the killer's gun. Was perhaps waiting and hoping for a chance to jump the man who shot him." Nolan snapped it out; he was becoming impatient, wanted Trent out of the room for a few minutes.

Again the constable gulped:

"What shall I do now?"

"Climb into your furs and help Pierre unload the carioles."

Trent drew a swift breath.

"The—is the corpse on one of the sleds?"

Nolan nodded grimly.

The constable stammered further:

"I wish—Sergeant, touching a dead body upsets me; it's a weakness I can't explain."

The plea touched Nolan on the raw.

"You have your orders." A granite-faced figure, he stared from a window, watched the two men unload the body and walk towards an outhouse. As they disappeared from his sight, he acted swiftly.

RELIEF AND CHAGRIN

Striding into the sleeping quarters, he picked up Trent's boots and hastened outside to where the frozen pieces of slush were lashed atop the other load. Breathing heavily, he tried to fit the boot soles to the iron-hard tracks. They were too large. He tried again; they would not fit. Relief and chagrin fought in his breast as, voices warning him the others were through with their task, he hurriedly re-entered the barracks. A minute later Trent and the Indian came in. Trent's face was livid; he sank into a chair. Nolan eyed him keenly, his brain working furiously.

"How's the finger?" Nolan broke the tense silence.

"Still pretty sore." Trent held it up.

"Guess you'll have to write out the report."

Nolan grunted.

"How about Morson? D'you send word to him?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Same day you left."

"M'm!" Nolan tugged at his ear. "He should be here soon, then. But listen, Trent, if he isn't here in two days you are to go and fetch him; and tell him to bring his boots."

"But——" Trent raised a bewildered

face. Briefly Nolan told him of the dead man's visitor. "I see," agreed the constable. It was Pierre, busily removing moccasins and socks, who broke the next silence.

"You talked loud, Sergeant, and I now know you t'ink some fella killed ol' man; I t'ink killer mebbe took plenty grub from ol' man's shack an' go across Big Lak'. Wild country 'cross t'ere; he could hide all winter."

"Would that help him? He could only hide there for a time; he's got to travel the river to get outside." Nolan, still busy with his own thoughts, answered absently, but the native's reply jerked him out of his reflections.

"Sure t'at 'elp 'im. On'y little time till spring, t'en my people come down to lak' to fish. Fella 'as plenty money an' could mebbe 'ire young buck to tak' 'im out t'e ot'er way; old Indian trail over mountains."

The sergeant emitted a long whistle, stared at the native.

"I've never heard of an inland trail, so I don't see how the killer would have learned."

Pierre shrugged.

"Lotsa people 'ave, t'ough. Mebbe killer learn'um from the ol' man 'e killed."

"M'm." Nolan stared at Pierre speculatively. He had a lot of respect for the native's keen power of reasoning, and perhaps the Indian was right. There was that chance that the killer was a newcomer who had drifted into the north and kept himself hidden; had not reported at any of the police posts. City strays often drifted down north on the off-chance of cleaning up a stake playing poker with the isolated trappers. But it was a slim chance, the sergeant felt that he had already fastened his suspicions on the right man, but he had to go slowly. Anyway, he could do nothing around the post until Morson arrived and Trent's finger healed. For a time he could not make real the hypothetical case he had

built up. Abruptly he resolved on a plan of action.

"To-morrow, Pierre, we buck the trail again. We're going to scout around on the north shore of Big Lake."

"Fine wit' me." With a contented grunt the native settled himself by the stove with a magazine.

MORSON'S STORY

It was a week later that Sergeant Nolan and Pierre again drove up to the post. Trent emerged to help with the unhitching.

"Any luck?" he asked.

Nolan shook his head.

"Well, Morson's here." Trent shouldered a load of bedding, adding as he led the way to the building: "And he is the man who made those boot-tracks."

Nolan's answer was a grunt, but he greeted the man who rose to his feet at their entry cordially.

"Well, Trent tells me you've been huntin' the feller who made them boot-tracks; here he is," said Morson. He grinned, tapped his chest.

"I see." The sergeant sighed wearily as he stripped off his furs. "Thanks for coming over and telling us."

He sank into a chair, idly watched the constable preparing supper. Maybe the food would stimulate his tired brain and body; until after the meal Morson could wait.

It was Morson who spoke first as the four men grouped themselves about the stove after the meal.

"Sarge, I've looked at what's left of Bresson, an' I'm dam' certain he didn't commit no suicide."

"I know that." Nolan's tone was irritable. "And I now know that you visited him during the thaw, just about the time he was killed. Why?"

"And why did you deny calling on him until I proved it with your boots and the frozen tracks?" Trent added.

Nolan sat bolt upright in his chair

as the constable added the question to his own.

"He denied it?" He stared at Trent. The constable nodded. Nolan swung back to Morson, stared his question. The man shifted uneasily.

"I'll answer them questions. I didn't deny callin' on Bresson; I jes' kept mum about it after you'd told me he'd been shot. Know why?" He addressed the constable. "'Cos Bresson an' me broke partnership after a whole winter of quarrelling. He was the orneryist cove in this district. But you trapped me with them boot-tracks; now I'm comin' clean." He paused, eyed the two policemen closely.

"The reason I calls on Bresson durin' the thaw is 'cos the warm spell brought on my roomatics an' old Bresson mixes dope that's the finest cure for roomatics I ever knowed." He ended on a defiant note. Trent looked at the sergeant and smiled slightly, raised his eyebrows. Nolan sat rigid, then spoke, leaning forward.

"Then explain this, Morson: boot-tracks on the floor of Bresson's cabin show that the man who wore boots—yourself, according to your own admission—took an exceptionally long stride. He jumped or stepped over something. I think that something was Bresson's body."

Morson chuckled suddenly. The two Mounties eyed him closely. Pierre's black eyes glittered with interest. Morson chuckled afresh.

"Well, if that ain't good. I told you that Bresson used to mix up dope for roomatics. It had to be rubbed in hard. I was stripped to the waist an' he was rubbin' me; I flinches, an' my back touches the red-hot stove. Took a long stride? Say, I nigh went through the roof. Guess that clears that up, eh?"

"It's plausible, but——" Trent finished with a shrug.

Morson swung on him furiously.

"Doubt me, eh? Say, young feller, most of us old-timers is troubled with roomatics. Here's proof. Look at 'em."

With a swift gesture he thrust his hands beneath the constable's nose; both Mounties gasped as they stared. The fingers were gnarled and twisted from the ravages of rheumatism. The sight shocked Nolan; those hands could not have aimed and fired a heavy revolver, that was certain.

Morson spoke further to the constable:

"Some detective, ain't you? I've been here two days an' you never noticed my hands. You've been sorta preoccupied. Mebbe you've got something on your own mind." He glared at the constable angrily. Trent flushed, shifted uneasily. The sergeant watched both men, then eased the tension by getting to his feet. Striding to a shelf he returned with the memorandum book and the note. He addressed Morson quietly, staring him in the eyes.

"Morson, I warn you not to *volunteer* any information just yet; merely give me straight answers to these questions." He extended the book and sheet of paper. "Look at those and tell me—and you should know because you lived with him—was that note written by Bresson?"

Taking the slip of paper, Morson spelled it out audibly, started violently. Handing it back, he spoke slowly and deliberately, his eyes on Nolan's.

"Sarge, as I never saw any of Bresson's writing, I can't say."

Nolan nodded. "And the book? Have you seen it before?"

"Yes, Sarge, in Bresson's cabin." Morson turned a few pages, looked up. "It's just a record of pelts caught, wood cut and grub eaten when I shared quarters with him. It ain't of no consequence."

"Thanks." Nolan took the articles back, his eyes cold. Of no consequence? His lips twisted grimly. Staring at Morson he saw the man wished to speak further; he silenced him with a look, and:

"Any further information you can give me, Morson, can wait until the

morning." His expression added: "When we are alone." And he saw that Morson understood.

TYING UP THE CASE



In the silence that followed, Nolan, now rested and refreshed, concentrated more fully on Morson's replies; if not accurate they were, as

Trent had remarked, at least plausible. Quietly he watched Trent remove the dressings from his sore finger, examine it, then replace the wrappings. As the constable finished tying the bandage it struck the sergeant that the injured member was also tying up the case, unless— He again lapsed into thought. It was Pierre, laying down his magazine and pulling on furs, who broke the quietude.

"Mebbe, Sergeant, t'at killer 'e fly in." He grinned, naively, added: "Often see aeroplanes up 'ere now, eh?"

Nolan smiled in spite of himself, explained: "While you were on patrol, Trent, I gave Pierre a short furlough. Down at Simpson he helped dig out a snowed-up mail-plane. His mind's been up in the air ever since."

"An' most of these yarns are detective an' air stories." Morson chuckled as he spoke and idly turned the pages of the magazine the native had laid down. "Wild an' woolly stuff that would appeal to a mission-trained native who likes his readin' rough an' ready."

"Dam' good stories." Pierre grinned over his shoulder from the door. "I learn a lot from t'em." A blast of cold air and he was gone.

Still scanning the magazine, Morson

grunted: "These natives are funny; they learn to read and write, but won't bother to talk good English."

Nolan did not answer, but frowned irritably, annoyed by the idle chatter that interrupted his thoughts. Head in hands, he sat staring at the stove.

The first thing he wanted to do in the morning was to have a confidential talk with Morson; he could arrange that when Trent and Pierre were outside doing the early morning chores. His subsequent actions would depend upon that talk. Of one thing he felt certain in his own mind, the killer was one of the present company, yet at present he could not prove it.

A blast of cold air announcing Pierre's return roused him; still musing he watched Morson lay down the magazine, address Pierre.

"Say, Pierre, mebbe to-morrow you'll write a letter for me, eh? I can't hold a pen 'count of my hands."

He held them out; the native nodded and grinned. The sight of those pain twisted hands focused Nolan's attention. He frowned angrily, turned to the Indian.

"You missed your guess there, Pierre. You'll remember you said only a green fellow or a Mountie travelled during a thaw. Morson's an old-timer."

The native shrugged.

"I said we easy fin' man who made boot-tracks. It was you who t'ought same man t'e killer."

"And I ain't," Morson grinned.

"Well, we shall know all sooner or later." Nolan got to his feet, stretching himself wearily, then stamped off into the sleeping quarters. Trent stood staring after him as he got to his feet with the others.

"Poor old Nolan! He's been working hard and is up against a blank wall."

"Work 'ard all for not'ing." Pierre grunted the words as he peeled off his outer clothes. "Killer 'e too clever for the sergeant. I still t'ink 'e fly in an' flu out; we mebbe never catch'um."

In his own bunk, Nolan caught the

remarks. His lips twisted grimly as he settled himself to once again review the whole case. Without warning his mind switched to an entirely new line of thought, continued to race furiously along the new avenue long after the snores of the others proclaimed they were asleep. When he finally settled himself for sleep, the sergeant was filled with fresh eagerness, anxious for the coming of the new day—knowing that if he were right, then the morrow would see Bresson's killer disclosed.

PIERRE'S WRITING

For almost an hour Nolan and Morson had been engaged in earnest conversation—a conversation ended by the entry of Trent and Pierre. During breakfast, as if by common consent, the crime was not mentioned. The meal ended, Nolan was first to get to his feet; his nerves were strumming; he had found it hard to sit through the meal.

"Guess we'll all rest up for the day." He tried to make his tone casual as he pulled on furs. "This case has grown cold, so guess another day won't make much difference." He hated himself for the lie. "You can stay inside, Trent, and loaf. Pierre's going to write a letter for Morson. I think I'll potter about outside for a spell." At that he left the building.

His first task was to visit the out-house and again examine Bresson's body. He studied the dead hands. They were not marred by rheumatism as Morson's were.

"He could have held a gun." Nolan whispered his thoughts aloud. "And I'm praying that he did."

Frowning thoughtfully he turned away, pottered about for another hour, deliberately killing time, his nerves so keyed-up he had to keep moving.

Later, glancing at the watch upon his wrist, he muttered:

"They should be through by now." Drawing deep breaths as he walked, he

made his way towards the barracks.

As he entered his eyes took in the whole scene as he shed his furs. Trent was busily engaged in cleaning all the firearms; seated at the table were Morson and Pierre, writing materials in front of them. Morson stared hard at the sergeant, then spoke:

"Sarge, you've got a real scholar here." He patted the native on the shoulder. "He's writ me letter for me, an' words that stuck 'im he copied either out of his magazine or this note-book of ol' Bresson's. An', look, Sarge." Morson extended the letter and the book. "Notice that with the words he copied from the book he even copied the handwritin'."

"T'at's 'ow I learn'um write." Pierre grinned pleasedly. "I copy'um words an' writin' from books at mission."

Nolan barely heard the words; he was scrutinising the letter and the book. Striding to the shelf, he picked up the suicide note, compared it with words in the letter; even his inexperienced eyes saw the marked resemblance. Raising his eyes, he glanced at Pierre, forced his tone to sound casual.

"I didn't know you were such a good scholar, Pierre; why didn't you let me know?"

Pierre shuffled uneasily.

"At ot'er post w'ere I work, I let sergeant know an' 'e mak' me write out all 'is reports. I not like t'at, so keep'um quiet from you. I like to read w'en in barracks."

"Plausible." Nolan spoke quietly, although his heart was hammering. The gaze he fixed on Pierre made the native quail visibly.

"Pierre, what did you do and where did you go when on furlough?"

Again the native shuffled uneasily, averted his eyes. His tone was a mumble.

"I travel 'round a bit, play poker wit' different fellas in t'eir shacks, mebber drink a little moonshine."

"I see." Nolan forced himself to go on, although his throat was becoming

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dry; he had bucked many a tough trail with Pierre.

"How did you guess Bresson had been shot by someone before I told you?" No answer was vouchsafed; all four men were rigid. "Then answer this one." Nolan's tone was stern. "Why did you suggest the killer had fled across Big Lake when you know damned well there isn't an inland trail. And, Pierre, why all the hints about the killer using an aeroplane?"

"Sergeant, I——" Pierre was shrinking in his chair, trying to evade the sergeant's flaming eyes, the biting questions.

"Don't lie, man! Your life depends on your answer!" Nolan shot it out. "You shot Bresson, Pierre, and you know damned well you did, and I know. I have positive proof!"

"Good God!" It came from Trent.

Morson was on his feet, his face shocked. Eyes stretched wide in fright, the native was staring at the sergeant, his lips mumbling unformed words. It was tragic. With a tremendous effort the sergeant got a grip on himself.

"Pierre, I'm your friend. We've bucked many trails and dangers together. Come clean. Tell me everything, and I'll give you my word I'll do all I can to help you." Nolan could go no farther, a giant hand seemed to be clamping his throat.

Hands extended, eyes beseeching, Pierre leaned forward.

"I tell you, Sergeant," he began. "I call on Bresson, as well as ot'er fellas 'cos I want a drink an' a game of poker. W'en I win a lotta money I wanta leave. Bresson not let me. 'E fulla moonshine an' scare me wit' leetle gun. Later I t'ink 'e's asleep an' try to sneak out.

'E wake sudden an' shoot at me an' 'it me. I t'ink I 'urt bad so pull my gun an' shoot quick. 'E drop dead. I scared lik' 'ell an' fix'um look lik' 'e killed 'imself. I know Constable Trent due to call on patrol, know constable 'im green so t'ink I easy fool 'im."

"One for you, Trent." Nolan's brain was swimming from reaction. Bresson had fired first, but he needed proof. He asked for it.

Rapidly Pierre pulled off top shirt and undershirt. An angry scar furrowed his ribs. Nolan examined it, grabbed the two shirts. The wound might heal before the trial was heard, but here were two bullet-riddled shirts to add to the testimony of Morson, Trent and himself. Only one verdict was possible in the face of such evidence—justifiable homicide. Rapidly he explained to the native; Pierre's eyes glowed with gratitude and relief.

"I now glad I tol' you," he said simply. "To-morrow I tak' you to w're I cache t'e money. But I not steal'um money, Sergeant, I win'um fair." He eyed the sergeant gratefully, then asked: "But w'at proof you got, Sergeant?"

A grim smile of relief twisted Nolan's lips. He tapped the book and papers in his hand.

"The entries in this book were made by Morson, when he lived with Bresson. In trying to make it look like suicide by copying the writing in this book, you left a suicidal clue." He broke off for a moment, finished: "You see, Pierre, Bresson was born and bred up here; he did not advertise the fact, but he could neither read nor write. He was the silent witness."

White



TEN thousand dollars, ten thousand dollars, ten thousand dollars! The figures pounded over and over again in the brain of Asa Bawn, the lure of dishonest money deafening his ears to the sounds they had grown to hate—the slithering whine of carioles, the “scronch-scronch” of snow-shoes, the strained panting of dogs flinging their weight into galling breast-straps; noises that are part and parcel of travel in the Far North. A quarter of a mile ahead, Jack Hall was breaking trail (fore-going) for the three teams, and Hall had stated that his furs were worth ten thousand dollars!

The winter-gripped Mackenzie stretched as far as snow-strained eyes

could see, a seemingly endless ribbon of giant-flung whiteness, shrouded by air so cold it was hazy with frost. A clinging, biting atmosphere that rimmed aching eyeballs with icy crystals.

What a life! Bawn cursed; he was not of the type that takes kindly to hardships. For months he had eaten nothing but bacon and bannock, topped off by flapjacks and syrup. And outside one could procure good food, decent clothing, enjoy shows and companionship suitable to one's tastes. And not have to drive dogs.

Dogs! Surly, snarling, stubborn brutes who protested, with whines and yelps, or in sullen silence, every inch of wilderness travel they had to haul the sledges over. Dogs! In a gust of

Fear

The Stranger, the Trapper and the Dogs



sheer spitefulness Bawn flailed his raw-hide whip. The animals replied with a devil's chorus of savage snarls, as the cruel lash snapped away tufts of hair from their shaggy hides.

The outcry made Hall halt, turn, then come running back to the rear of the cavalcade. Stopping the teams, he eyed Bawn quietly and spoke in the measured tones of a man who had learned iron control over his temper.

"Animals quitting on you?"

"No, but they was lagging." Bawn's tone was faltering. Facing that direct look, he felt again his inferiority to the hardened northerner. Hall turned to the dogs and saw the leader of the rear team licking a bleeding flank. His eyes were aflame as he again faced Bawn.

"Bawn," he said quietly, though his voice was tense, "you've used the raw-hide on Balmer, the best lead dog I ever had. An animal I raised myself, and who's never known a whip-bite before. Gad, I——" Breaking off, he strode to the dog's side and commenced to soothe him. The animal, with soft whimpers of happiness, returned his caresses. Bawn eyed the scene sneeringly. A lot of fuss to make over a wretched dog!

He hastily erased the sneer as Hall, rising to his feet, again approached him. The big man's eyes were gleaming with cold contempt. Again he addressed Bawn, his every word edged.

"Bawn, I know that you are just a waste hunk of sheer meanness, but, if you value your safety, don't take it out on the dogs." His voice took on more gentle tone as he finished: "Don't you think that you should at least try to show some appreciation?"

"Meaning?" Bawn found the quiet tones disarming. Felt that he could risk a sneer. He regretted it the next instant as Hall suddenly lunged forward, gripped him by the shoulders with a clasp he could not shake loose. For a full half-minute the bigger man spoke; thirty seconds that seemed an age to Bawn, now thoroughly frightened.

"If I weren't twice your size, I'd lick

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you now!" Hall's expression showed that he meant it. "Seven days ago I ran across you without a team, without a rifle, a pack on your back containing hardly any grub, heading for the outside.

"Though I didn't like your looks much, and was short on grub myself, I offered you my help to get to rail-head at Waterways. Nearly six hundred miles.

"What happened since? First you drive my native helper away by using a dog-whip on him. I let him go because he said it was either him or you, and you're white. At least your hide is."

The emphasis on the "hide" made Bawn flinch. Hall went on: "Know what'll happen if you don't change your ways?"

Bawn shook his head, realising that he had gone almost too far. Hall went on in the same grim tones:

"Dogs'll stand just so much, then they'll round on you. We might beat them off, but we'd have to smash the daylighters out of them to do it. Make them unfit for travel. Might save enough for one team though, and if that happens I'll take that team, give you back your pack, and let you try and get to Waterways alone. Nearly another four hundred miles—alone!"

Hall released his grip and stepped back.

FOUR HUNDRED MILES ALONE

Four hundred miles—alone! To Bawn, a sudden blast of wind, swirling a mist of stinging, frozen particles about the two men, seemed to repeat Hall's statement in a menacing, sinister moan. He shuddered as the stark dread of the cold and desolation once again seeped into his vitals—the awful dread that the Far North breeds in weaklings and cowards—the unmerciful pounding the white wastes accord those who will not fight back. White fear!

The dread of something intangible

which sends men fleeing from the cold-enveloped wilderness. Makes them stampede, wildly, frenziedly, toward the nearest civilisation. Makes them cunning, desperate, determined to procure aid, in any way at all, to get outside, and to secure the money necessary to live with, once there.

As Bawn's affrighted eyes again took in the scene of cold desolation, he shivered afresh. Bringing his gaze back to Hall, he spoke appeasingly.

"I'm sorry, Hall; it's the straight gaff of life up here that's too much for me. My nerves are cracking. Guess I just don't belong. I know I can't make Waterways without you, either afoot or handling three teams."

"Driving three teams? What do you mean? These animals and carioles are mine." Hall's face, shadowed though it was by a heavy parka, reflected the surprise of his tone.

Bawn drew in a deep breath and abruptly changed the subject. Gad! He had let his tongue betray him that time.

"Guess it's my turn to do a bit of fore-going," he said, and with wide-legged snow-shoe strides he ran ahead. The two men and fifteen dogs broke into a steady, distance-eating trot.

Had Hall noticed his break? Bawn wondered, as he plunged ahead. Certainly the teams and carioles belonged to Hall. So did the pelts loaded upon one of the sledges. Furs that would, in the open market, fetch at least ten thousand dollars.

Ten thousand dollars! A small fortune! Bawn licked at his frost-rimmed lips even as he thought of it. And he himself was heading outside broke. Had even lost most of the outfit he had spent money on, at Waterways, months before. A blazing shack had consumed some. An air-hole in the ice had sucked away his one team and cariole. Sheer inexperience had permitted him to be captured in these wilderness traps.

He had sneered at the hardened

Northerners who, a few months before, when he had set out for the white wastes, had told him, with the sincere kind-heartedness of outdoor men, that no greenhorn, and especially a city-bred man, should even attempt a season in the white wastes alone.

Alone! He had never known the real meaning of being alone before. Yet always had he played a lone hand, as a man who lives by his wits must, if he would keep from the clutches of the law. For a man sometimes talks in his sleep, raves in the throes of delirium, and, after the last job he had pulled off, the Far North had appealed to him as a good place in which to lie low.

Perhaps make a few dollars as well, for he had learned of the big poker games played in traders' dwellings. His trapping outfit had been a bluff—and his bluff had been called. The Northerners he had met had proven they were not simpletons—but men who knew how to guard their hard-won cash.

He had been cleaned of the few hundreds he had taken in with him. Then he had tried, in earnest, to trap. Being green, he had failed, miserably. And, slowly, the inexorable truth had been burned into his very soul; he did not possess the grit to withstand the heart-shrinking hardships of life in the Far North.

At first he had railed against fate; then whimpered and pleaded. Followed the white fear and frenzy; the loading of his cariole and flailing at protesting dogs.

When the dogs and most of his outfit were lost he had thought it was the end. Then had come Hall, with furs worth ten thousand dollars.

Bawn's face, half-hidden by the spume of fine snow his snow-shoes kicked up, became a mask of cunning greed. He thought further of the half-hatched plan that had made him drive away Hall's Indian helper. Evidently his luck had changed. Fate had dealt him a new hand. It was up to him to play his new cards.

THE LAST TRAIL



Ten days later, with all of three hundred and seventy miles of arduous travel lopped off the four hundred, Bawn and Hall sat facing one another across a camp-fire. To-morrow would see them both safely at rail-head at Waterways. Unless something happened.

Bawn knew that something was going to happen; knew that the time had arrived to put into effect his scheme to rob his benefactor. His eyes sinister, repellent, he stared attentively at the bigger man's face. In the glow from the crackling tamarack it showed serene, content. For this was the life Hall loved. The snuffing of dogs, the clean air, the sense of freedom and well-being.

In the few days he had been in Hall's company Bawn had learned of this, and marvelled at it. For, although it was now in abeyance, the white fear, component of dread of the cold and desolation of the Far North with its gruelling hardships and half-tamed dogs, still lurked in his craven heart. How could any man like such a life? he wondered.

Neither could Bawn understand that it simply was not in him to respond to a form of life that was both well-principled and clean. Always he had

favoured furtive, underhand ways of making a living. Untrusting and distrusted, a man whose code was lower than the shaggy dogs he feared.

Wrapped in profound reverie, Hall continued to gaze into the flickering flames, apparently unaware of Bawn's presence. And, also, of another pair of eyes that were fixed upon his face. Wide, searching, understanding eyes. Eyes aglow with love. The eyes of Balmer, the dog.

The other animals, well fed and content, were curled in their snow nests, deep in the slumber of trail-weary beasts of burden. But Balmer, nose on paws, kept wide awake at the foot of the spruce-tree to which he was tethered, refusing to sleep until the one being he worshipped also slept.

Something caused Bawn to remember Balmer. Removing his gaze from Hall, he turned to regard the dog. Instantly the beast's eyes, luminous in the light from the fire, became cold, baleful. From his deep, canine chest there rumbled a low, menacing growl of hate. Steel muscles suddenly taut, he rose to his feet and continued to threaten, with lips drawn back from gleaming fangs.

The sound aroused Hall from his reflections. A look of understanding passed between dog and master, then Hall turned to Bawn.

"Dogs certainly are good judges of human nature. I won't be a damned bit sorry to be rid of you to-morrow, Bawn. And if you hang about Waterways for a few days, waiting for the weekly train, for Heaven's sake keep clear of Balmer, as he'll be running loose. And he is just waiting for a chance to tear you to pieces."

Bawn shivered at this, for, as short a time as he had been in the North, he had glimpsed at a post all that remained of a native who had fallen victim to blood-hungry dogs. And ever since he had lashed Balmer he had felt that only Hall's presence held him safe from the dog's steel jaws. Then he grinned craftily, remembering that very

soon he would be beyond the reach of both Hall and his pet. And he would be ten thousand dollars richer!

Hall's even tones cut into his thoughts.

"I've been hurting the dog's feelings by tethering him every night since with a steel chain, just to be on the safe side. But I don't think he would attack you unless I gave the word or was not present. Or if you lifted a hand against me," he finished.

The last sentence set Bawn to thinking. Had Hall an inkling of his scheme? Was the dog firmly secured? He voiced his thoughts.

"But seeing this damn dog of yours is chained, he couldn't break loose if he tried to, eh?"

"No." Hall was gazing at the animal. "You're not thinking of assaulting me, are you?" He did not turn his head.

"Not if you do as I say! You see, I'm not needing you any longer!" The venom in the man's voice made Hall swing round—to gaze straight into the muzzle of his own rifle. For a brief second he stared, then smiling a dry smile, he said:

"You utter fool! Surely you are not so green that you think you can get away with this?"

Hall's calmness aroused Bawn to frenzy; frightened him for a space. Always he had been used to men who flinched and whimpered at the idea of pain and death. Fiendish cruelty engulfed him, urged him to send a red-hot missile of death crashing into the face whose eyes regarded him with such quiet sternness. He fought down the impulse, for to shoot was not according to plan. His whole attitude expressive of evil purpose, he got to his feet.

Hall sat motionless, only his voice showed his feelings. It was vibrant with pitying contempt as he asked:

"Well, are you going to use a little common sense and drop that rifle and your absurd pose?"

"Yes; but you won't see me." Bawn's eyes were aflame with the un-

holy light of the killer. His voice grated with the merciless tones of the coward who has the advantage.

"I won't, eh?" Hall's voice was still under control, but his face had become suddenly strained. He went on: "Bawn, I've lived in the North for ten years; in all that time I've never known a man to get away with robbery or murder. You see, the Mounted are aided by every decent man up here. They are just as anxious as the police to rid the country of scum like you; to keep the North clean. Better be sensible," he concluded.

Bawn's reply was a sneer, and:

"But they've got to catch a fellow, first. And I've got this all doped out. Been figuring on it ever since I learned the value of your load."

"Perhaps I was indiscreet there," Hall answered. "But as you were helping with the driving, I had to let you understand why the cariole loaded with the pelts had to stay at the tail. Lead team sometimes drops through an air-hole. And ten thousand dollars is a lot of money," he finished.

"You're damn right, it is," Bawn agreed. "Guess it took you all of three seasons to get that many skins, eh?" Hall did not reply, and Bawn went on: "If I'd had a gun I'd probably have jumped you then, but for one thing I was a bit scared of the distance. And besides, I doubted whether I could handle three teams, as I told you." He grinned as Hall's expression showed he recalled the words. Bawn ended: "From here in I'll need only one team."

Hall considered this for a few moments, then:

"You mean that for just one day's more travel you won't bother with grub, bedding or dog food? You'll leave two teams and carioles in camp here?"

Bawn nodded triumphantly.

"Yes; and even if anyone ran across this place in a few days, which is hardly likely, they wouldn't even think there'd been anything wrong pulled off."

BILL OF SALE

For a space after that there was silence, while Bawn allowed his morbid temperament to enjoy the drama of the situation to the full, hoping that Hall would add to its ghastliness by breaking down, pleading.

But such was not Hall's way. Speaking slowly, choosing his words carefully, he reminded:

"Bawn, a few moments ago you admitted that it takes several seasons to catch ten thousand dollars' worth of fur. There are men at Waterways who will remember that you left there only a few months ago. How will you explain the possession of so many pelts?"

Bawn laughed out of sheer, delighted malice.

"You must think me a dummy," he sneered. "When I left there I let everyone know that I was going trading, as well as trapping. Free traders carry a lot of money on them, eh? Well, I met up with a trapper and bought his catch."

"Even at that, any fur-buyer you go to there will want to see your bill of sale," was the chill rejoinder. "I can't jump you as you'd plug me before I could reach you. My dog can't help me, even though he'd like to." He nodded toward the huge beast, now upon his feet, straining with all his strength against the steel links that held him.

"So you see," Hall added, "you're stumped there, because I tell you frankly, rifle or no rifle, I won't write you one, only to be finished off afterward."

"Stumped, eh?" Again Bawn grinned, then said: "Somewhere about your person you've got a paper with your signature on. One of my side-lines, outside, was writing the other fellow's name."

"A forger, eh?"

Again the quiet tones touched

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Bawn's vanity, stung him to boasting further.

"And I've been playing hide-and-seek with the cops too long to not know how to do it. They've never been able to get anything on me yet, and they won't be able to get me for this. I've got to have money—these pelts are worth money."

"Fear again," was the quiet response. "It was fear that drove you up here. It was fear of the North that started you heading south. It is because you are afraid to arrive outside without money that you are about to commit a dastardly crime. All your life you have been a victim of fear, but if you carry out your purpose your dread will be increased tenfold. Always you will be wondering if your crime was discovered. Always, Bawn, will you feel that the noose is swinging, swinging, swinging, waiting for you."

"Stop!" It was a hoarse scream. "I'm letting you talk too much, and now you've started preaching." Bawn felt his very heart curling up. Hall seemed so sure. Again he spoke boastfully, to hide his true feelings.

"I tell you there won't be one clue left."

Hall shook his head:

"You might think so!" he advised, "but you will be bound to give yourself away some day. You will always be furtive, frightened. Your attitude will arouse suspicion. But I value my life at more than ten thousand dollars; if you want the pelts, take them. I will give you my word I will not notify the police."

"Your word!" It was a sneer. "I've never trusted no man's word. Soon as you had tailed me into Waterways you'd set that damn dog of yours on me."

"Fear again," Hall replied. "You are even afraid to take a man's word, eh? Gad!" For the first time he showed signs of anger, let Bawn see how

tightly he had been holding his feelings. "Gad, Bawn, what a cur you are! And I've got to take it quietly."

For a moment it looked as if he were going to risk all and leap across the fire to grapple with Bawn, then he shook his head, as if he realised that the distance was too great, that the eyes glaring along the rifle-barrel were too baleful with murderous resolve.

"Thought better of it, eh?" Bawn snarled, as he saw Hall relax again. Then: "Get up and turn round." Hall obediently did so. "Stick your hands behind you." Again Hall complied. Then Bawn screwed up his courage to inflict that which he himself dreaded in every fibre—physical hurt.

In a flash he reversed the rifle, brought the heavy butt crashing down upon Hall's head. As Hall sprawled senseless to the snow, Bawn was assailed with a strange nausea; for the first time in his life he had resorted to violence.

He backed away from his victim, only to jump forward with a shrill cry of fear, as something snapped close to his head. Rifle ready he wheeled, to find that he had almost stepped within the reach of the tethered Balmer, a clawing, leaping incarnation of ferocity, striving his utmost to reach his master's attacker.

Again and again the dog leaped, and each time the heavy chain jerked him back. Slaughter-lust erased Bawn's dread as he saw this. Raising the rifle, he aimed at the great beast.

But the dog, twisting, growling, tugging in maniacal fury like a thing bereft of all sense, presented a difficult target. When the animal finally had to pause for breath, there came a swift stab of flame as the rifle sent its thunderous voice reverberating through the forest. Balmer twitched a few times, then lay quiet.

Satisfied that the dog was dead, Bawn set down the rifle and hurriedly commenced the completion of his plan.

THE PLAN



Bending over Hall, he found him to be breathing stertorously, the laboured breathing of a man whose brain is numbed. He would no

doubt remain unconscious for several hours, Bawn decided. At least long enough for his ally, the below-zero weather, to get in its deadly work.

There was no sign of a head wound, Bawn noted, as he removed his victim's cap, the heavy fur of the head-piece having prevented that. And to bare Hall's head was part of his plan, as the biting cold would soon change the effects of the blow into the state of coma that is the forerunner of death by freezing.

The remainder of his plan was simple.

Swiftly he heaved Hall into a sitting position, propped him up with his back to a tree. Going through his victim's pockets, he found the papers he sought. Another thought struck him. Further hurried search and he had discovered the waterproof match-box he had remembered. Small thing in itself, but, in the boreal air of the Far North matches often mean the difference between living and freezing to death.

Then came the hitching of a team to the cariole loaded with the furs. Straightening up, Bawn paused to scrutinise his handiwork. He was satisfied. He grinned his approval.

The clearing presented an absolutely innocent appearance. Ten dogs, again curled up in their snow nests after the disturbance of hitching a team, were tethered to as many trees. Two carioles, with their disordered loads of food and bedding, were drawn up out of the animals' reach. On the far side of the

fire, leaning against a tree, sat a man apparently asleep.

Bawn grinned again. There were no signs of foul play. He could visualise the terse, written report of the Mounted Police, if the matter ever came to their attention:

Traveller drew up from the river to camp for the night. Unhitched and tethered dogs. Unloaded carioles to get dog food and bedding. Fed dogs and self. Sat near fire and, played out from a hard day on the trail, fell asleep. Fire died down, man froze to death.

A common enough tragedy in the Far North.

At dawn the dogs would awaken. Impatient because no man came to feed them, they would chew their thongs and release themselves. Savagely they would fight over and devour all the food in sight. Again they would curl up and sleep.

On their second awakening they would again hunt for food. Finding nothing else, they would eat the dead Balmer. Then, still not satisfied, the wolf-strain would set them snarling over the body of their master.

Some day, perhaps, a police patrol would find all that remained. A few bones and shreds of clothing. The Mounties would examine carefully every small bone. Finding no bullet-hole or marks of violence upon the human remains, they would reverently inter them. They would pay no attention to bullet-marks upon the skeleton of the dog. It often happens that a man has to shoot one of his animals.

Then Bawn suddenly stiffened, listening. From far away was borne to his ears the deep-tongued chorus of a wolf pack, hunting for anything in the way of food. The sound caused him to shiver. Then he remembered, the beasts were his allies. He grinned again, feeling no compassion for the man he was abandoning. He turned, and urged his

team down the steep bank and on to the ice.

An hour later he was many miles away trotting easily along the frozen highway behind toiling dogs. And that ghost of a leer still lurked on his face, for he felt confident that he had not overlooked one detail. He had even left the rifle with Hall, after noting that the butt carried his victim's initials. The law could never get anything on him!

In the hour that had elapsed since Bawn's departure, the fire in the clearing died down to a heap of faintly glowing embers, giving barely any light, but still sufficient to show a stirring of life in the shadows.

Slowly, with soft whimpers of agony, Balmer, the dog, struggled to wavering legs. Pain-clouded eyes striving desperately for focus, he turned his huge head this way and that, revealing an ugly wound that extended from the top of his skull to half-way along his right flank. Blood oozed from the hurt, crimsoning the snow at the animal's feet. Weakness caused him to again sink to his stomach.

But the animal's stout heart forced him to struggle again to his feet. Canine love set his nostrils a-twitch, seeking the man who was his master. Across the embers of the fire he sensed the one being he loved.

Whimpering piteously, he strove to reach the huddled figure that was Hall; yet was afraid to pull too hard on the chain that had wrenched his neck so unmercifully. Painfully he crawled to the full length of his tether—to find that it no longer held him, for the bullet that had inflicted his grievous wound had struck his heavy collar, and thus been deflected. But not before it had completely severed the stout leather.

BALMER TO THE RESCUE

More moments of racking movement and the dog was eagerly, whimperingly,

nuzzling the senseless man; trying in his dumb way to aid him. In his anxiety he toppled Hall over. The man stretched prone, one hand in the still glowing embers.

The dog became frantic, pawing and licking his master, and uttering queer, throaty growls of helplessness. The mauling, added to the sting of burns and acrid fumes, had their effect, provided needed stimulant. Hall stirred, groaned, then, struggling to a sitting position, stared about him dazedly.

With returning consciousness came remembrance. Carefully he felt his head. No sign of an abrasion, merely a nasty lump. Half-frozen hands he rubbed vigorously on the dog's shaggy coat. They reddened with blood from the animal's wound. Hall examined the beast carefully; then, his face rigid with anger, scrambled to his feet, gathered wood, got the fire blazing brightly. Once again he examined the dog.

"Gad, Balmer! Gad, the dirty skunk even tried to get you!" Even as he spoke, the intelligent animal, again overcome by weakness, toppled over at his feet. Hall, his lips set in a straight line that boded ill for Bawn if they ever met again, was busy. A billy of snow rapidly became hot water. As he washed the hurt, Hall saw it would only mean that Balmer would be laid up for a time; would not result in a permanent injury. As he dressed the wound he continued speaking:

"And the fool thought he could get away with it! Even if he sees me at Waterways, he'll try to bluff through with his fake bill of sale. Might even seek police protection from me. You are out of it, Balmer; and violence won't serve our ends, anyway. But we'll even things up, old-timer, get back our furs, and put that skunk behind the bars for a spell.

"Seek police protection!" The thought made Hall smile thinly as he lifted the dog on to a pile of robes. He

covered him with a blanket and offered a pan of water that the animal lapped gratefully. "We've been in tight corners before, old son, and not so many hours ago I thought we were in it for keeps. Now we'll be in Waterways to-morrow night right on his tail. And we'll think up a scheme on the trail, eh?"

The dog's eyes gleamed with understanding. The silent adoration made Hall turn away from their stare for a moment. He swung toward the river, addressed the man now many miles away.

"You shot my dog, Bawn; only one thing matters now, to square accounts!" His eyes quiet with resolute purpose, he replenished the fire, sat down to await dawn. For with a double team and a light load he could make twice the speed Bawn was making. Anyway, he did not wish to get into Waterways until several hours after the arrival of the other man. It would not suit his purpose.

The lights from the small cluster of buildings that comprise the frontier town of Waterways were winking cheerily through the cold darkness as Hall, the following night, urged his tired dogs up the steep trail that led from the frozen river to the town-site. As he trotted along behind the team he was faltering on his feet. Thirty miles of arduous travel, closely following a severe blow on the head, had tested his strength to the utmost.

Straight to the police barracks he drove and, as a trooper opened a door at the sound of his arrival, enlisted his aid to lift Balmer from his bed of blankets on the sled, into the cosy interior of the living-room.

"Sick?" the constable asked, as they laid the dog on the floor.

"Both of us," was the grim reply. "But I can keep going long enough to talk. Where's the officer in charge?"

The constable stared, then quickly led the way into another room.

A short distance away heated bar-

gaining was going on in the log building that was the dwelling of Tom Denham, fur-buyer. The dealer was trying to make the price he was offering for Bawn's load as small as possible, while Bawn was fighting for a higher figure.

For two hours the bargaining had been in progress, ever since Bawn, after sleeping all day at the hotel, had got up and hauled his load to the town's sole market.

"If you don't like my price," said Denham, finally, "then why not take your pelts into Edmonton? Weekly train leaves to-morrow morning."

Bawn did not want to do that. At Edmonton he was too well known. He wanted to get on the train with all the cash he could, stop in town only long enough to change trains, then keep on going.

"According to your bill of sale," the dealer went on, "you paid only six thousand for these pelts. You got a damn good buy. I'm offering you eight thousand. That's two thousand you make for hauling them out over the ice. Pretty good profit, eh?"

"But——" Bawn began, then broke off. He knew little of the value of furs, and it would not do to say that Hall had stated they were worth ten thousand. After all, it was all clear profit.

"I'll take your money," he said grudgingly. The dealer wrote out a cheque and form of receipt. Bawn signed, taking the cheque in exchange, grinning as he did so. The one bank would be open in the morning before the train left. He would pull out with eight thousand dollars in cold cash stowed away about his person.

Then the dealer spoke again, words that sent a chill through Bawn.

"Stick around for a bit. Every fur deal that's put through up here has to be O.K.'d by the Mounted. They check up pretty closely on strangers; ask me to hold off my deals with men I don't know personally until the evening. At that time of day, right after supper,

they send a man down here. One should be here at any minute now." He glanced at his watch.

"But——" Bawn tried to conceal his uneasiness. After all, even if Hall had got loose and turned up, it was only one man's word against another's. "But," he began again, "this deal is all in order; why should I have to stick around?"

"Just a matter of form." The dealer was filling his pipe. "And I believe in doing as the law says." He puffed quietly, then: "Used to trap, and trade, myself, until I froze off a few toes. Now that I can't follow the dogs, I stick here. But I'm fond of dogs," he went on reflectively, "so one of my sidelines is breeding 'em."

FOND OF DOGS



Bawn shivered. Fond of huskies. Savage, uncontrollable, vicious brutes, for ever waiting their chance to round on a man; sink wicked fangs into his throat. He shivered again as he thought what his fate would be if ever he encountered Balmer. Thank God the brute was dead! And to-morrow he'd be beyond the reach of the powerful sled dogs he feared; the animals he had always lashed to hide his fear from them.

The dealer seemed about to speak again, when the door flung open and, in a cloud of frosty air, a Mountie stepped vigorously into the room. With an effort Bawn returned his cheery greeting.

"Well, you old crook! We've still got that nice warm cell waiting for you!" The trooper grinned addressing Denham as he shed his heavy furs. "Hope you haven't got much for me to do to-night. Feel more like yarning with you—over a glass of your private stock," he ended slyly.

Denham smiled in reply.

"Only one deal to-day, not much coming out this early in the season. I think it's all in order."

The constable examined the papers, then busied himself counting pelts. At the end of half an hour he broke the silence.

"O.K., Tom. Now what about it?"

With a grinned remark about "thirsty cops," the dealer limped to a cupboard, returning with a bottle and glasses. The three men settled themselves comfortably about the fire.

"Won't keep you long." The Mountie addressed Bawn. "Where d'you meet up with Hall?"

"About nine hundred down, near the Big Wind River." Bawn felt confident he had nothing to fear now. The Mountie seemed more interested in his pipe and drink than in him. The trooper put another question.

"Why did he sell? Why not bring them out himself?"

"Guess that was his business," Bawn answered. "But between you and me, he'd gone native. Guess he'll never come outside again." He added: "And I think the man was a bit weak in the head; talked kind of strange." The after-thought pleased Bawn; he thought it a brick more in his wall of protection.

"M'm!" the policeman nodded, his eyes keen. "That, then, might account for the fact that he followed you in!"

Bawn, with a tremendous effort, concealed a violent start. He dared not weaken now, he must employ all the cunning he possessed.

"Followed me in?" The surprise in his tone was genuine. Questions lay thick upon his tongue, but he did not utter them.

"Yes, he followed you in," reiterated the policeman. "Arrived about an hour ago. Had a dog that had been hurt; said it had been shot. But it wasn't hurt very bad, was pulling its share, anyway." The Mountie stopped, his eyes probing.

But now it took all of Bawn's will to hide his feelings. Balmer was not badly hurt! What a fool he had been not to make sure! Bracing himself, he asked:

"Well, supposing Hall did follow me in, that's all right, eh? Surely the man can do as he likes?"

"Certainly," agreed the Mountie. "The only thing is he says that you shot his dog and stole his furs. But I got a copy of his signature and brought it along with me, and it compares exactly with the one here." He again picked up the bill of sale. "Also," he added, "he's twice your size and had a rifle on his load. So I don't see how you could have held him up," he ended.

The dealer made as if to speak, but the Mountie silenced him with a look. Putting down the paper he again turned to Bawn.

"Men often mosey in here with strange tales of being held up. This paper seems to be O.K., so does your story. But we'll have to drift over to the post and let the O.C. interrogate you. But there won't be much to it, as you appear to be sane and sound; whereas we examined Hall and found a bad bruise on his head. Tumble on rough ice, I guess. Probably accounts for his wild yarn."

Bawn smiled thinly. What a simpleton the Mountie was! He was actually furnishing the answers to his own questions. "Tumble on rough ice. Head hurt. Probably accounts for wild yarn." Then Bawn remembered something else: "Dog not badly hurt." Followed the warning Hall had given him: "If you hang about Waterways, for Heaven's sake keep clear of Balmer." The dog might be loose! Fear made him put a risky question to the trooper.

"You say that Hall and his dogs are at your post?"

"Eh?" The Mountie seemed surprised. "Why, yes. That is, all but the dog who looked as if he'd been walloped by a whip-butt. Say," he

exclaimed, as if suddenly recalling something, "it's odd about that animal! When Hall saw that we rather doubted his yarn, he jumped to his feet, ran out into the compound and turned this dog loose, shouting after him, 'Tear 'im down, Balmer!' Then Hall crumpled up. The action made us think more than ever that he didn't know what he was doing or saying."

Balmer loose! Bawn could have screamed from the agony of sheer fright that gripped at his vitals. And in a few minutes he would have to accompany the policeman almost a quarter of a mile along the trail that led to the barracks. Walk along a dark trail! And somewhere out there a powerful, ferocious brute was seeking him! At the first opportunity would hurl itself, tearing, growling, biting upon him.

Bawn was so frozen by terror that he did not notice the Mountie had got to his feet and drawn the dealer aside. He did not hear the whispered words:

"Don't want to leave until something happens. I'll explain later. Make some excuse to detain us."

"O.K.," Denham whispered, then aloud and jovially: "Well, fellows, what about another quencher?"

Bawn wrenched himself from his taut attitude. Seeing the policeman standing, he thought he wanted to leave. He added his arguments to the dealer's, even as he took the proffered drink.

"No rush, Mountie; it's early yet." The trooper hesitated, sat down again. Desultory conversation followed. Bawn tried to make it more interesting; began to talk eagerly, about anything. He must delay things for a time, at least long enough to think of some excuse for not visiting the officer in charge until morning.

What a fool he had been not to have bought a gun the moment he arrived! A few doors away was a store where he could purchase a weapon; only a few

steps that he felt he could traverse safely by the light of day.

But even as Bawn talked he felt that the situation had grown tense. Why should it? Even though Hall had turned up, he had nothing to fear. It would be one man's word against another's; there had been no eye-witnesses. Besides, had not the Mountie himself said that they all thought Hall a bit light-headed?

Then once again his brain started whirling furiously as the policeman turned to look at the clock. Was the trooper anxious to get away? How could he get out of accompanying him?

And then Bawn was on his feet, his frightened cry still echoing in the room, as with appalling suddenness a weighty body hurled itself at the door, almost splintering the woodwork. Followed furious pawing and scratching, pleading whines, deep threatening growls.

Careless of the fact that the other men were staring at him with knowing, accusing eyes, Bawn remained frozen in his attitude of fright. Fear made him act, and cry out again.

"Don't let him in! He'll tear me to pieces! Your gun, man your gun!" He was clutching at the Mountie, trying to pluck his heavy service revolver from its holster. The trooper pushed him away, uttered not a word. The dealer was limping toward the door.

With a frenzied leap Bawn stopped him, hurled him back.

"For God's sake don't open that door!" he panted hoarsely. Still the other two kept silent, waiting. More words came, the babbling of a man in a mortal funk. "It's Balmer, Hall's dog. He's after me. Me! Don't just stand staring! Help me! I robbed Hall and shot his dog. Now he's sent the brute after me."

The Mountie spoke, drawing his heavy revolver.

"Tell the truth and I'll protect you."

In a flood of relieved feelings, Bawn told all. Nothing mattered now but to do anything this policeman asked of him. He had promised to protect him.

"And that's the truth," he ended, clutching the trooper's arm.

"Then I guess you can open the door," the Mountie suggested to the dealer. At the words Bawn reached up for a rafter; in a flash he had swung himself roof-ward. The policeman had betrayed him!

Face grey and sweat-flecked, eyes stretched wide in horror, Bawn stared at the door. He choked back a scream as Denham flung the door wide and a huge beast came charging in. Then he stared in sheer amazement. The dog was fawning upon the dealer. It was not Balmer!

He had been tricked, but— Although still bewildered there came the instinct of self-preservation. Perhaps he could run for it. Even as the thought was born, he realised its folly. The Mountie was staring up at him. The revolver menaced. Dazedly, Bawn swung to the floor, dimly conscious that the policeman was snapping on the handcuffs.

A grim smile upon his face, the trooper tersely replied to the dealer's questioning stare.

"We believed Hall's story, but we didn't have much proof. We needed more evidence and a confession to ensure a conviction. Hall suggested playing on this man's fear. So, Denham, we took the liberty of taking Prince, here, out of your kennels and over to the barracks. Knew that when turned loose he'd head for here on the run. Agreed to release him at a stated time. Now I want you to come over to the post with us."

And as the three men trudged to the barracks, Bawn cursed the white fear that had delivered him into the hands of Northern law and justice.

The Missing Finger

The Flaw in the Flawless Crime

HAWKER stood beside the hole cut in the ice with the sweat oozing from every pore in his body, despite the fact that the temperature was boreal, at least forty below, with a blustering wind hurling the snow along the frozen reaches of the Mackenzie in huge, billowing clouds. The blizzard was an ally in his diabolical scheme, for its blanketing folds would cover up all tracks; yet, as he stood there half-hidden in a mist of frozen, wind-swirled flakes, Hawker cringed from the storm.

It was only his distraught imagination, he knew, yet somehow the glacial breath of the gale seemed to be repeating in eerie, taunting wails, the last few words gasped out by the man whose dead body he had just pushed down into the icy waters. Hawker tried to still his panic by forcing a laugh. Only a quavering, frightened cackle issued from his frost-rimmed lips. Frantic urge to get away from that desolate, awesome spot seized him. Whirling blindly he stumbled away into the night.

Back in the cabin, he crouched low over the red-hot stove and fought to stifle the awful dread that had panicked him down there on the ice. Tried to close his ears to the menacing, whistling moans of the blizzard. He mustn't let his nerves get the better of him now; the deed was done and he must go through with his plans.



Anyway, his nerves had only been shaken for the time being, he assured himself; he had nothing to fear now. And the job he had just finished would have jarred the nerves of any man.

It had been a grim, ghastly business, that killing of the owner of the cabin, the stripping of the lifeless form of every shred of clothing, and then, with the gale shrieking at him and buffeting him at every step, packing the corpse down to the river and pushing it beneath the ice.

Gradually, he became calmer; sweat no longer glistened on his strained features. He was safe now. The body of the man who had said his name was Lamby, was now in the grip of the mighty river's undertow; was being rolled and dragged farther and farther away every minute.

And spring was at hand. When the break-up came, the thawing ice would likely grind and pound Lamby's remains to fragments; or at least make the body unidentifiable. A grin shadowed Hawker's face at that. He had laid his plans well, and how simple

it had all been, and how perfect! Not a flaw anywhere. Crouched against the stove he went all over it again.

Since two long months ago, when first he had conceived the idea of killing and robbing Lamby, he had planned and thought and prepared until he had arranged every detail of his scheme. Had done all he could to make of this the flawless crime. So far, apparently, he had succeeded. The worst was over.

Give the Mounted a corpse to find and a trail to follow, and they usually brought the evil-doer to justice. But he had left them no corpse to find—at least, that chance was in his favour, for rarely did the Mackenzie reveal its grim secrets.

But, better yet, he had carried out his scheme with such diabolical cunning, he would leave behind not the slightest hint that a resident of that section of the Far North was missing—not the slightest suggestion that a crime had been committed.

That was the strongest part of his plan; the factor that should allow him to lead his life unhaunted by the dread that some day his crime would be discovered, that weeks, months, perhaps years hence, the long arm of the law would reach out and wrench him towards the gallows. Until he had got clear of the country where his victim might be known, he was going to assume the identity of the man he had murdered.

Instead of leaving it to chance for a police patrol to find the deserted cabin and, perchance, commence hunting for its owner, he intended to call at the nearest R.C.M.P. post and impersonate Lamby. It would take nerve, but it would effectively check any possible investigations upon the part of the Mounted. He chuckled aloud at the thought; piled more wood on the stove; continued to gloat.

It had been that striking resemblance between himself and Lamby—that, and the finding of the large bundle of currency in Lamby's cabin—that had

first given birth to the idea of committing the crime. Same build, same colour hair, same colour eyes and not one outstanding feature between them, excepting that the little finger of Lamby's left hand had been missing. Well—Hawker lifted his own left hand and stared at it. The little finger had been cut off close to the hand.

As he continued to regard his mutilated hand he inwardly flinched. He had not thought that such a trifling hurt could have caused him so much pain; so many sleepless nights. But it had been worth it, he considered.

He had cut off that finger when splitting kindling—the day after he had decided to go through with his nefarious scheme. Since then, and while waiting for the stump to heal, he had surreptitiously made himself thoroughly familiar with everything that was Lamby's. Had even secretly and laboriously taught himself to imitate exactly his victim's handwriting. Apparently, he had not overlooked a thing.

Now all he had to do was to report to the nearest police post, so that they would have it on their records that Lamby called on his way outside, then head for railhead and take train to some large city and submerge himself. And he would have twenty thousand dollars to spend. At the thought of the money, he got to his feet with miser-like intention of counting it again—and as he moved a dark stain on the floor reflected the lamplight.

The sight of that ominous blood-stain was like a knife across the taut string of his nerves. His tortured mind saw it all again. His ears told him that those sinister whisperings, those mournful wailings and gaspings were actually the voice of the blizzard shrieking down in vengeful fury.

But, just as it had seemed out there in the darkness, down on the storm-swept ice, the gale seemed to be mocking him, watching him. Each gust and blast was telling him that murder will

out, whispering over and over again those eight words Lamby had struggled to gasp out as he had laid there dying. Just eight words:

"Now — I — understand. That — finger. It—will—hang——"

At that Hawker had plunged the knife into Lamby again.

Would he for ever be hearing those words? What had Lamby meant? How could a missing finger put the noose about his neck?

In sudden frenzy Hawker commenced to throw food and blankets together, gather up other belongings. Blizzard or no blizzard, in the morning he'd head out. He must get away from the place where every wind-breath hurled Lamby's last words at him.

THE FLAWLESS CRIME

For four days Hawker had been on the trail, and each mile he had put between himself and the cabin had helped to allay his fears. He would soon forget those eight words, forget the whole matter. How could a dead man harm him? As for the finger, that was the strongest link in his plan.

Lamby might not have called at the police posts any more than he himself had. But, on the other hand, he might have done so, and the police might have learned that he carried a large sum of money and was in that district.

If he failed to show up again they might institute vigorous inquiries. And if Lamby called at a post, although the police might remember only vaguely his general appearance, they would certainly, with their training in keen observation, have noticed that Lamby was shy one finger. Also, might have a copy of his handwriting.

No, to make his the flawless crime, Hawker considered his safest plan was to call at a post and impersonate his victim. He would defy anyone, now

that his own finger was missing, to prove that he was other than his victim.

As it all seethed through his mind for the hundredth time, and he gazed ahead at the white ribbon that was the frozen river, Hawker grinned. On the cariole in front of him was a small fortune in ready cash. And but two months before he had been penniless.

A townsman who had always lived by his wits—con games, forgery, dipping, gambling—after the last job he had pulled off the Far North had appealed to him as a good place in which to lie low. And perhaps clean up a stake as well, for he had learned of the big poker games played in traders' dwellings, and he knew how to manipulate the pasteboards. His dogs and trapping outfit had been a bluff—and his bluff had been called. The northerners he had met had proved that they were not simpletons, but men who knew how to guard their hard-won cash.

He had quickly been cleaned of the small sum he had taken in with him. Then he had tried, in earnest, to trap. Being green he had failed miserably.

Desperately determined to procure enough money to get back to town life somehow, he had taken to the trail with the vague idea of committing a few petty thefts. And then, purely by chance, he had run across Lamby. He would never have discovered Lamby's cabin in any other way, for it lay, half-buried in the heavy timber, a full mile back from the river.

He had been mushing along, alternately railing against fate and turning scheme after scheme over in his mind. The sound of shots had reached his ears. Tethering his animals he had cautiously investigated. He had come across Lamby butchering the carcass of a moose he had just shot. Hawker had then shown himself, but so silent had been his approach he had startled Lamby. The man had swung round with an oath and levelled rifle.

But then, as dark was nigh, Lamby

had invited Hawker to fetch up his team and camp for the night. The next morning Hawker had headed out again—and doubled back as soon as he had seen Lamby set out to haul in the moose carcass. He had thoroughly ransacked the cabin, yet so skilfully he left nothing disturbed. When he had found the large parcel of currency he had gasped.

At first he had been for taking it then and there, but cold reason told him he could not hope to get away with such a flagrant, daylight robbery. Stealing away, he had made camp a few miles down-river and set himself to hatch out a scheme that would make that money his. It was then that the idea of committing a flawless crime had come to him. He had shrunk from the idea of murder—but twenty thousand dollars! Greed had overcome fear.

Stating that he was heading for his own cabin, he had again called on Lamby, had accepted another grudgingly given invitation to stay the night. And the very next morning, after an evening spent in studying his host and mentally perfecting his scheme, Hawker had deliberately chopped off his finger. For a couple of days he was genuinely sick, then had begged Lamby to let him stay on until his injury was healed. Lamby had reluctantly agreed.

But Lamby had remained strangely reticent, had told nothing about himself, excepting to state that he was a fur-buyer. That satisfied Hawker, accounted for the money, for he knew that fur-buyers usually carry large sums in ready cash with them.

Trotting along behind the sled, Hawker chuckled aloud. He was safe now, was no longer hearing Lamby's last words, but was visualising lights, pleasures, all that money will bring in a city.

And how could a missing finger hang him? Lamby had not known what he was saying. Now everything seemed so simple.

AT RAT PORTAGE POST



"So your name is Lamby, you are a fur-buyer, and because your health has given out on you, you are heading outside without waiting for the spring business, eh?"

Corporal Leyton, in charge of the Rat Portage post of the R.C.M.P., put the question to Hawker as they faced one another across the big desk in the living-room of the post.

"Yes."

Hawker grinned, although his nerves were strumming. But surely there was nothing to fear from an interview with this pleasant-faced young man regarding him with quiet interest. Just a bit of red tape, this, but it should effectually cover up his crime for all time.

"M'm!" Corporal Leyton cleared his throat. "I don't seem to recall you. Did you report at this post on your way in? If so, when? And where's your cabin?"

"Why——"

With a tremendous effort Hawker concealed a start. Three simple questions, but he could answer only one of them. He felt his palms grow moist. The policeman's eyes were probing. Hawker suddenly wanted to scream, the questions were so simple. He replied to the last question first.

"My shack's down-river, inland a mile from Wolverine Bend." He said it anxiously, at the same time rubbing his sweating hands on his thighs.

"That explains it." The corporal's eyebrows lifted. He turned to the only other occupant of the room, a constable lounging against the stove. "That's why, Axton, you didn't run across this man on your last patrol."

The constable nodded, eyed Hawker interestedly.

"I stick to the ice-trails," he said. "I don't plug through heavy timber with a dog-team unless I have to."

"Don't blame you." The corporal turned back to Hawker, sitting there and fervently hoping that he could evade the other two questions. The corporal seemed to have forgotten them, asked instead: "Why did you build your cabin so far back from the ice-trail?"

Damn these direct questions. Their very simplicity was deadly. Frenziedly, Hawker groped for an answer. Found one.

"I was laying low a bit. My grub-stake wasn't so big, and you know how a few callers can eat up a fellow's grub." As he finished he placed his hands upon the desk, leaned forward ingratiatingly, fervently hoping that Corporal Leyton would not repeat two of his former questions.

The Mountie did not do so. Instead, he leaned back in his chair, let his eyes stray to Hawker's hands—and suddenly sat up straight. His own hands, gripping the arms of his chair, gleamed white. Hawker noticed his start and his nervous grin widened. The policeman was staring at his left hand. It was what Hawker wanted; he held up his left hand.

"Noticing my missing finger, eh?"

"Yes."

Intent now on establishing his false identity, Hawker did not notice that Corporal Leyton's eyes and lips had suddenly tautened. He was not aware that the constable had unobtrusively approached and was standing tense and rigid at the corporal's side.

"The way you jumped when you noticed I'd a finger missing proves you've never seen me before," Hawker went on. "But some of your fellows know me. When you're talking with them, tell them that Lamby, a fellow shy one finger, called on you." Inwardly he was almost purring; he could answer those two first questions now,

but the corporal did not put them again. Instead:

"How long ago since you lost that finger?"

"Years and years ago." Hawker said it grinningly. Wonderful how confident he was now feeling. "Stump's a bit sore-looking, but that's the frost; it always bites a fellow's weakest spots hardest." He ended: "On account of this missing finger, guess you'll remember me, eh?"

"Yes," agreed Leyton, "we shall remember you, And, Lamby, I am very glad that you called; you have saved us a lot of work."

"How?"

Hawker stiffened. Again his palms felt clammy. But the corporal's next words reassured him.

"We're supposed to keep tab on every resident in our districts, so sooner or later we'd have run across your shack. Had we found it abandoned, we'd probably have done a lot of scouting round to find what had become of its owner." Bending down he opened a drawer in the desk, produced a file of papers and a writing-pad. As he placed them on his knees he added: "Now, when we visit your cabin we shall know the whereabouts of its owner."

Exultation flooded Hawker; mentally he patted himself on the back. It was all proving so simple. He had obtained exactly what he wanted. Eagerly he took the writing-pad the corporal handed to him, grinned inwardly as Leyton said:

"Just one trifling formality, please." His tone was quiet. "Write a brief chit stating that you called at this post and that you were treated courteously."

"Sure!"

A grin shadowing his face, Hawker plunged the pen in the ink-well, commenced to write. He wrote slowly and carefully, imitating with all his skill the handwriting of the man he had murdered. Engrossed in the task, he did not see the constable bend down and

study the file the corporal held. Did not observe that the corporal scribbled a few words on a sheet of paper, that the constable read them, nodded, then left the room. When Hawker looked up the corporal was leaning back in his chair with the file on his knees.

MONEY FROM THE BANK

"There you are, Corp." Grinning ingratiatingly, Hawker pushed the pad into the corporal's outstretched hand. "Now I guess I can be on my way, eh?"

Corporal Leyton did not reply; he was studying the note Hawker had written, was holding it against the file.

Hawker guessed what he was doing and almost chuckled aloud. No doubt the Mountie had a copy of Lamby's handwriting in that file and he was comparing it. The corporal must think him a softie. He had seen through that subterfuge of writing that note easily. What a simpleton the young Mountie was! Well, there was nothing now to be afraid of. Leaning back in his chair, Hawker waited, confident that the forged handwriting would easily deceive the policeman; successfully clinch his impersonation. He was right.

Laying down the file and note the corporal looked up, at the same time sliding open another drawer in the desk, inserting his hand and gripping something that Hawker could not see. The action and a certain stoniness in the Mountie's eyes shook Hawker's nerve afresh. He'd be glad when all this damn-fool red-tape business was ended. His nerves wouldn't stand much more.

A blast of frigid air on his back made him whirl—and every last drop of colour drained from his face as he saw what the returning constable placed on the desk at the corporal's side. But cunning anger fought with dread. What right had they to search his cariole and bring into the room his

bundle of money. He tried to still the nervous twitching of his throat long enough to say something; but the corporal forestalled him, even as he ripped the wrappings from the parcel, tumbled over the desk the wads of banknotes.

"Where did you get this money?" The corporal's eyes were cold, his lips grim and tone hard.

Hawker shrank back yet fought desperately to reply. They had nothing on him; they couldn't possibly know; he mustn't weaken now, and he wouldn't.

"I brought it in with me," he snapped.

"You brought it in with you!" The corporal repeated the words, exchanged a glance with the constable. "And we both heard you say that. Now be careful. You swear you brought this in with you?"

"Yes." Hawker wetted his suddenly dry lips. "I got it from the bank myself."

Corporal Leyton drew a long breath, his eyes seemed to be boring into Hawker's very soul. He brought his right hand away from the drawer, brought it away empty, for the constable had ranged up behind Hawker. Getting to his feet the corporal leaned across the desk; his tone was chilling, it was so level.

"The only reason I can find for this wonderful streak of luck, for your walking right into my post, is that irresistible urge that often assails men. You thought you'd got clean away with it, but you were not quite sure. You had to know. You shrank from going through life not knowing whether you were being sought or not; at what moment the gallows might suddenly reach for you. Well, you now know, and we know."

Hawker could have screamed aloud from the agony of sheer fright that gripped at his vitals. This young policeman had read his thoughts. He knew. But how could he know that

Lamby was dead? That thought steadied him. Somewhere there was something wrong.

"I don't know what you mean," he said hoarsely.

The corporal picked up the file and note.

"We have your general description here, and there's no doubt at all that you are the man we have been hunting for weeks."

"Hunting for weeks!" Hawker almost yelled the words, his heart thudding with renewed hope. Almost sobbing in his relief he went on:

"Then you've got the wrong man, Corp. I thought there was a mistake somewhere."

"But there isn't." The corporal's tone and eyes were like ice. "These notes were taken from the Edmonton branch of the Bank of Commerce by a lone gunman, who shot the teller dead.

We got a copy of his handwriting from the note he pushed through the cashier's wicket. It is the same as yours. We got his general description and"—suddenly reaching forward he grasped Hawker's left hand and held it up—"others in the bank at the time are willing to swear that the little finger of the killer's left hand was missing." He paused, added: "And you told us yourself you brought this money in with you. Anything to say?"

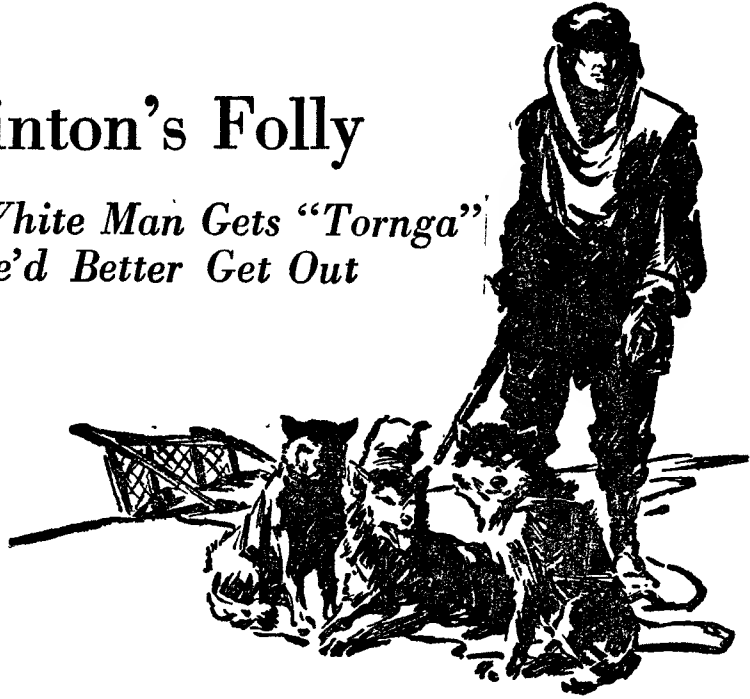
"I——" The protest ended in a gurgle as Hawker stared unseeingly before him in fascinated horror. No, he could not tell them where he had got that money. He was no longer conscious of his immediate surroundings; he was visualising his victim lying on the cabin floor, was hearing again words gasped out by a dying man: "That finger. It—will—hang——"

Lamby had known.



Swinton's Folly

*When a White Man Gets "Tornga"
He'd Better Get Out*



HIS breath coming in clouds of vapour, Southgate straightened up from his task of unhitching the dogs. Then he frowned, for with the cessation of exertion there came a return of the profound depression which had made him hitch up the team and take a run just for the sake of distraction and exercise.

Perhaps the life was wearing him out, he reflected. Each day he found the cold more intense, the silence more awesome, the solitude more stupefying. Well, in a few more months he would be able to return outside—get back to civilisation. Squatting on the side of the sled he gave himself over to cogitation.

This was his and Swinton's third year in the Arctic. Damn Swinton, anyway! At Edmonton, where he had run across him when hunting for a partner well acquainted with the Far North, the man had seemed to be all right. But, once away from the confines of civilisation—almost as soon, in fact, as they had loaded up their trade

goods and supplies on the power-scow, ready for the two-thousand-mile run down the Mackenzie to the Arctic—Swinton had given full rein to his instinctively coarse feelings, bullying Indian and Eskimo helpers alike.

Still, in spite of everything, they had prospered. And it wouldn't be long now before he could say good-bye to hardships and Swinton's objectionable company.

Adopting the usual custom, the partners had taken it in turns to make trips to Eskimo villages whilst one remained at the post. This time Swinton had been away for ten days, and might be back at any moment. Even as he thought of it, Southgate broke off his reflections to listen. He noticed the dogs likewise cocking inquisitive ears.

Faintly, through the boreal atmosphere, there came tell-tale sounds—the creak-creak of ice-coated runners; the scuffling of many paws on iron-hard snow; the panting, whining breathing of toiling dogs. Presently, from amidst the out-flung hummocks of inshore ice,

a komatik (ice-sled) came into view. Swinton was coming! Southgate rose to his feet and waited.

A walrus-hide whip snapped viciously as, sighting the flag waving above from the frame-built, snow-banked post, one of the two atigi-clad figures shuffling along behind the komatik urged the straining beasts to further effort. But the sagacious brutes did not need encouragement. Scenting their home, they threw their weight willingly into the galling breast-straps. A few moments more and they dropped—steaming, panting bundles of shagginess—in front of the door.

"Howdy, Southgate? Say, but it's good to get back!" Stripping off his outer mitts as he spoke, Swinton, a huge bulk of a man, advanced toward his partner.

Southgate did not at once reply; his gaze was fixed questioningly on the small, fur-clad figure shrinking against the sled. Ignoring his partner, he strode across the intervening space and abruptly folded back the hood of the smaller figure's atigi. As he had suspected, it was a girl—young, and, as Eskimos go, comely. Savagely he swung on the grinning Swinton.

"You confounded fool!" His voice bit like the frigid air. "What do you mean by this? Why have you brought this girl back with you?"

With a sour grin, Swinton answered.

"Why? 'Cos we need a native woman around this joint to fix our clothes and footgear, don't we?"

"Yes," snapped Southgate, staring straight into the leering eyes. "And if it hadn't been for the way you abuse our native help, we'd be able to keep them. But, damn it all, Swinton, you know as well as I do that no Eskimo will allow his squaw to work around a white man's post unless he's hired as well!"

"Ye-ah?" Swinton's eyes were slitted. "Well, mebbe I intend to marry this girl. There should be a priest along soon."

"No; you don't, Swinton! Also, you can't! I know you too well. You've no more intention of putting up with all this for the rest of your life than I have. Swinton"—Southgate's tone grew almost pleading—"don't be an utter fool. I've seen this girl before, and I know her man. What have you done to her husband? Where did you leave Hannak?"

"It's none of your business!" flamed the bigger man. "Still, I'll tell you—if only to get your goat. I got Hannak tight on lemon extract and pulled out with his squaw. Hannak's in his igloo near Kigmuit." He waved his arm contemptuously toward the north; then he suddenly stiffened and stared. Progressing slowly toward the post was a far-away black speck.

"TOO BLAMED SQUEAMISH!"

"Well, say, what d'you know about that?" Swinton breathed the exclamation in a cloud of steam. "I believe that blasted native has followed me all the way in."

"It's a team right enough," agreed Southgate, likewise straining his eyes toward the north. Then he turned again on his partner. "Listen, Swinton. If that is Hannak, and he wants his squaw, you must let him have her. You've got away with a lot of raw stuff up here, but you won't be able to do it all the time. D'you remember Wharton? He acted rough toward the natives, and ended by getting a sealing spear shoved through him."

"Sure! And the Mounties got Tokotik for it, didn't they?" sneered Swinton. "Stretched 'im for it down at Herschell. The natives ain't forgotten that—they ain't out knifing any more white men."

"And did hanging Tokotik help Wharton?" flared Southgate. "Good Lord, Swinton! You're a full-grown man—act like one! To keep this girl here is downright madness! I've got a

voice in this; either you let Hannak have his squaw or I'll take my share and head outside over the ice."

"Well, pull out and be damned to you!" The big man's face was contorted with fury. "You're too blamed squeamish for this life, anyway!"

"All right, Swinton!" Southgate was now livid with anger. "We're partners no longer. God knows I've stood enough from you. I've made a decent stake, and I'd like to get it outside before the natives start punishing me for your actions. You're ruining our business with your damned foolishness!"

"Ruining nothing!" Swinton snarled it out. "With you out of the way I'll clean up more during the rest of the season than we've made all the time. You've got to be hard-boiled to get ahead! Treat the natives square—that's your motto. Mine's to clean up as quick and as big as you can and get out. Pull out if you want to; but I'm gambling that when I hit Edmonton I'll have twice your stake!"

Southgate stifled the hot reply that rose to his lips and looked again toward the north, where the approaching team was now within easy view. Then he strode toward the building, went inside, and set about the business of preparing a meal.

Looking up from his duties a few minutes later, he saw that Swinton had unhitched his dogs and, with the aid of the girl, was now unloading the pelts and stowing them safely in the built-up cache. The pair would be clamouring for food in a few minutes, so he busied himself again at the stove.

Then came interruption.

With a panting, scrambling rush Hannak's team pulled into the compound. The dogs dropped to the snow as soon as halted, their shaggy flanks heaving. Of Hannak, Southgate caught only a glimpse as the Eskimo raced past the window. Flinging open the door, he saw the native grasp the girl and push her toward his sled. Then things happened!

With a roar like a wounded walrus, Swinton made a dive for Hannak. Exerting his tremendous strength, he grabbed the little man, lifted him at arms' length above his head, and then smashed him down on to the snow. His face writhing with killing lust, the white man glared down at the prostrate Eskimo, who now lay quiet and still. Seizing the girl's arm, Swinton moved toward the shack.

For a moment Southgate could barely believe the evidence of his own eyes; then, without a word to his partner, he ran to Hannak's side. Tenderly he picked up the inert bundle of fur and carried it into the building. Placing the native upon a bunk, he ran anxious hands over him.

The Eskimo was merely stunned. A few minutes later Hannak opened shock-clouded eyes and stared wonderingly about him.

His gaze wandered from one white man to the other, shrinking from the murderous look flung at him by Swinton. Before the partners could stop him, he heaved himself from the bunk, raced to the door, and leaped outside.

"Hy-aah! Hy-aah!" At his yelled command the dogs leaped to their feet and into a run. A hundred strides away the native turned and shook two fummitten fists toward the post. Then he was gone, hidden from view by the ice-hummocks.

Slowly the two white men turned back inside and closed the door. The glance Southgate turned on his partner was worried; Swinton's expressed triumph.

"There goes one of your man-killing natives!" he sneered. "Scared stiff! Bet you that's the end of all trouble with Hannak!"

Southgate did not reply. The end! Surely Swinton must have realised the primeval malevolence of the Eskimo's final gesture. What a fool the man was! In silence he placed food upon the rough table, and without further words the meal was consumed.

"YOU WIN"

As he pushed aside his plate, at the conclusion of the meal, and commenced to load his pipe, Swinton asked

sneeringly:

"And when are you heading out?"

"You win!" Southgate produced his own pipe. "You know damned well that I can't take my share out until navigation opens. All the same, Swinton, it's my opinion that if you're wise you'll take Nutungnuk straight back to her village. I admit that there's not much danger of your being killed openly; the natives have too much respect for the Mounted for that. But Hannak will take word back that you are tornga (filled with evil) and there's only one way to cure that, from the Eskimo standpoint. You will have to be run out of the country or killed in such a way that the tornga is shut up with you when you die."

"Ye-ah?" Swinton grinned derisively, although there was a strained look about his eyes. "Don't see how they're going to do it. And another thing. They won't hold no grudge against you, so, from now on, you can make the trips while I stay here. Is that okay with you?"

Receiving Southgate's affirmative he grinned afresh.

Anyway, Southgate reflected, he'd be better off on the trail than hanging around the post with Swinton. Besides, they hadn't much more trade goods to dispose of, and soon now the ice would go and they'd be able to sail outside. Yes; Swinton could stay at the post for the balance of the season, and be damned to him!

For seven days Southgate had mushed across the frozen desolation—seven long, soul-warping days. Travelling had been hard, and because

he had no native guide he did not dare to venture far from the frigid tundra that formed the coast-line. Consequently, he had failed to locate the sealing camp he sought, and his komatik was still piled high with the goods he wanted to exchange for Arctic fox-pelts.

On this, the seventh night, as he crouched close to the Primus stove in his flimsy, snow-banked tent, listening to the uneasy whining and snuffling of his half-fed dogs, he tried again to shake off the feeling that it was not pure chance which had caused his failure.

Moccasin telegraph, Arctic radio, telepathy, no white man knows exactly how the Eskimos send news to one another. All the same, Southgate felt certain the word that tornga stalked abroad at their post had been broadcast. Moreover, he somehow knew that things had been happening at the post during his absence. He determined that in the morning, regardless of loss of business, he'd head back to his quarters.

Feeling easier after making this decision, he turned out the stove and wormed his way into his sleeping-bag.

Awaking in the morning, his soul filled with the biting loneliness of life in the white wastes, he stiffly emerged from the cosy warmth of the sleeping-bag. Then, lighting the Primus, he pulled on his atigi, loosened the tent flap and, bracing himself against the breath-sapping cold, stepped outside.

With mitten-hampered hands he unlashed the komatik tarpaulin and dug out slabs of white-whale meat, which he flung to the clamouring dogs. Filling his billy with snow, he re-entered the tent. As he cooked and consumed his frugal meal he did not even suspect that from the south an Arctic patrol of members of the Mounted was heading straight toward him, or that they had news for him which bore out his vague premonition.

It was on the evening of that day that he met the patrol. As he was un-

hitching his team, preparatory to making camp, he noted that the dogs had sensed something. Straightening up, he peered into the mist-shrouded distance. Vague shapes loomed close, and he hailed them. His call was answered, and a few seconds later three teams and four men mushed up and halted. It was a full-strength patrol—two policemen and two natives, respectively guide and interpreter.

The sergeant in charge advanced and stared hard through the Arctic gloom at Southgate. Then he thrust out a furl-clad hand.

"Been trying to overtake you, Southgate," he said. "I've got rather bad news for you. Soon after you left your post burned down. We noticed the glare on the ice from twenty miles west, otherwise we shouldn't have called on this trip. Got there just in time to see a pile of smouldering ruins."

"My partner?" Southgate choked it out.

"Oh! he's all right; and so's your cache," replied the officer. "Only the main building burned down. We stuck around long enough to see Swinton fixed up in a snow-hut, and then hurried after you to put you wise. Your partner asked me to tell you to keep any stuff you may have left; you're going to need it before break-up. As soon as we've made camp we'll have a real chin-chin and I'll tell you more."

He turned away to assist his companions; Southgate likewise busied himself with preparations for the night. But his brain was busier than his hands. The post burned down! Was it because of Swinton's folly over the girl? He was soon to know.

SCARED STIFF

"What's the matter with that partner of yours?"

The sergeant shot the question to Southgate as, supper over, the three white men and the natives squatted

around the Primus stove in the police tent.

"In what way?" Southgate strove hard to be loyal to his partner.

"Well"—the sergeant reached out and carefully adjusted the oil-stove—"a fire's serious enough, away up here in the Arctic, but Swinton's got stores in the cache, and your pelts are safe, so all you've lost is the building—which you'd have abandoned anyway—and the few things inside it. Nevertheless, that fire has scared Swinton stiff; he wanted us to stay with him until you got back! Now why is that, Southgate? Is he in wrong with the natives?"

Before replying Southgate thought hard. He wanted to keep faith with his partner, but if he didn't divulge all he knew these keen-eyed wearers of the scarlet and gold had a way of finding things out for themselves. He decided to tell the truth.

"So that's it, eh?" commented the sergeant, when he had finished. "Getting high-handed with the natives! I wondered what the girl was doing around the post, with no native man about. Still, if a fellow wants to turn squawman that's his business; we're not supposed to interfere." He smoked reflectively for a few moments, then burst out:

"He's a blasted fool, all the same! It's fellows like him who cause most of our long patrols. People outside read in their newspapers: 'White man killed by Eskimos,' and think what savages the natives must be, and wonder why we don't hang a few of them. Whereas, nine times out of ten, it's the white man's own damned fault."

He stared straight ahead for a moment, then continued:

"And this kind of case is getting harder and harder to prove. The natives are growing cunning. Once upon a time, when they'd bumped off a trader, they'd come and tell us all about it. It was crude stuff—done with the sealing-spear, arrow, or knife. But

since we started punishing them properly, things are different.

"Last spring Captain Pinsent's schooner, out of Seattle, picked up two bodies from a floe. Signs read that the men had smashed their scow against the ice and just naturally starved and froze to death. As a matter of fact, though of course we couldn't prove it, they'd treated the natives rough, so the Eskimos tied 'em up and set 'em on an ice-pan to freeze. After they were dead, the cunning beggars sneaked out and took the thongs off them."

"Well," he rose and started to peel off some of his outer clothing. "I've been up here long enough to learn that providing a white man plays square the natives will do the same, and therefore the straight trader can make money. But if a white man acts dirty, he generally gets what's coming to him. Even up here fools must pay for their folly. You'd better advise that partner of yours to get outside right away."

"And that ends my noble superior's speech," grinned the constable, also getting to his feet. "Once in a great while he gets somewhere near the truth; and it's my opinion, Southgate, that your partner is finished so far as trading with the natives is concerned. Once a white man's tornga he'd better get outside. It's bad medicine to double-cross Eskimos. It's a devil of a life up here anyway," he added with a chuckle. "Let's sleep and forget it for a while."

Mushing his lonely trail toward the post next day, Southgate thought over the Mounties' words. Incensed as they doubtless were toward Swinton, the Eskimos would not brave the wrath of the police by open murder. Also, according to their beliefs, they would have to kill Swinton in such a way that the tornga would perish with him. Had he been burned in the fire this would have been successfully accomplished, but they could hardly burn a snow-hut. On the other hand, of

course, the fire at the post might have been purely accidental.

Well, in a few more days he'd reach the post and find out for himself. Also—and Southgate took much comfort from the thought—the sergeant had promised to call in on his return trip.

There was nothing to worry about. Swinton, in a well-built igloo, with a stove to warm it and plenty of food, would be quite all right. When he got back they could use the tent he had with him, for a snow-hut has an unpleasant way of becoming foul from oil-fumes unless it is provided with plenty of air-holes. In fact, he had heard of two white men, unused to Eskimo igloos, who suffocated themselves by using a Primus in a snow-hut. But that, of course, would not happen to an experienced northerner like Swinton.

SNOW BLANKET

Nevertheless, Southgate found the burden of his thoughts, coupled with the effort of Arctic travel, almost unbearably wearying, and it was with a feel of vast relief that he camped, six days later, barely twenty miles from the post. And that night a blizzard swept over the frozen desolation.

Buried in profound slumber, Southgate was unaware of the piercing, icy flakes that swirled from the heavens. The tent, well banked with blocks of iron-hard snow, hand-carved and set one atop the other, easily withstood the buffetings of the gale.

The same virgin blanket swirled its folds about the site of the burned post, sifting its way into crack and crevice of the snow-hut wherein slept Swinton and the girl. They slumbered undisturbed, knowing that the snow could not choke and fill the down-sloped holes carefully cut through the walls for ventilation purposes. Neither did they hear the approach of a figure which slipped out of the darkness like the spirit of the blizzard.

The shape stood for a moment quietly surveying the igloo, then moved closer to the crude shelter. The dogs, aroused from their sleep, strained pointed, inquisitive ears. Soothed by the intruder's sibilant native chatter, they coiled up once more in their snow-nests.

Slowly the wraith moved to the entrance to the hut. The block of snow that covered the entry hole was removed, and a soft whisper floated into the confined space. The girl stirred uneasily; then, as her name was breathed again, she sat upright. Slipping swiftly into her atigi, she slid out into the black cold.

The wraith remained on hands and knees, staring intently at Swinton, sound asleep on a pile of furs. A moment later the stove flared brighter and the door block was replaced.

Outside there were a few whispered words, and the girl squatted motionless in the snow while the phantom busied itself around the hut. Minutes passed before the soft-moving shape returned to her side. Then, hand in hand, girl and wraith fled into the Arctic night. They toiled on for almost an hour, before eager whimperings led them to the tethered dogs they sought. "Hy-aah! Hy-aah!" Panting yelps, creaking runners; then nothing but the shrieking blizzard, spreading over the scene its all-concealing cloak.

In spite of the difficult travelling occasioned by the storm of the night before, the evening of the next day saw a wearied Southgate urging equally played-out dogs over the last half-mile to the post. With a sigh of relief he halted the patient brutes. The other dogs crowded about in eager welcome to their master and their kind. But where was Swinton?

Trying to stifle his newly-aroused

fears, Southgate strode across to the snow-hut, calling his partner's name as he approached. There was no reply.

Stooping, Southgate tore the door block free with a powerful heave. The rush of foul air that emerged was nauseating. Waiting for it to clear away, Southgate crawled into the igloo, mentally berating his partner for being so foolish as to go to sleep leaving a Primus stove at full blast. He would certainly wake with an awful head on him. Then another thought struck Southgate—could the blizzard have stopped up the air-holes?

The idea galvanised him into frenzied action, although he knew that so experienced a man as Swinton would undoubtedly have cut the vents properly.

Fumbling about in the semi-gloom, he presently encountered a pair of feet and backed quickly outside, dragging the inert Swinton with him. Fifteen minutes of frantic attempts at resuscitation proved completely unavailing. Swinton had been asphyxiated as he slept!

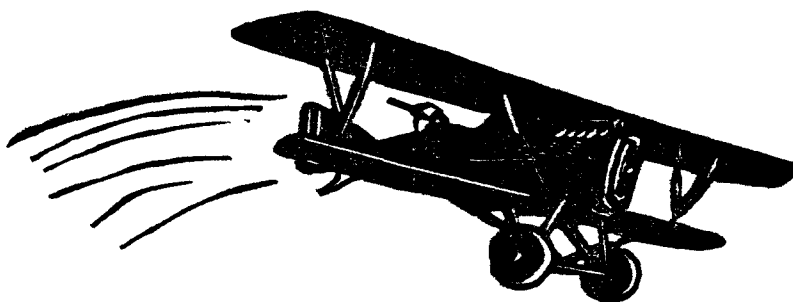
The girl! Suddenly remembering her, Southgate crawled into the igloo again. It was empty.

Emerging, white and shaken, he scrambled to his feet and carefully examined every inch of the outside of the igloo. Then, with his arms hanging helplessly by his side, he stared down at his dead partner, whilst scraps of his conversation with the Mounties flitted through his distraught mind.

"Natives are getting cunning—we couldn't prove it."

No, it could never be proved, it would be far easier to blame it on to the snow that had whirled down the previous night. But in his own mind Southgate knew.

Every air-hole in the igloo had been deliberately plugged!



The Super's Stratagem

When Mounties Take to the Air

A SHADOW smudging the light from the doorway caused the man crouched over the still form lying on the cabin floor to whirl swiftly with an audible intake of breath. He found himself staring into the muzzle of a revolver held by a man dressed in the winter garb of the Mounted. The Mountie was smiling thinly.

"I knew you'd come back," he said.

Slowly, the man he had addressed got to his feet. He eyed the trooper steadily.

"Well?" he asked.

For a space after that neither man spoke, just standing there sizing one another up. The trooper, in the open doorway with the snowflakes whirling about him, seemed as some wraith from the blizzard that was screaming down from the Arctic. The other man appeared as a ghoul disturbed at his fiendish work. There was something almost repellent, sinister, about the outward calm of both; they seemed to accept the finding of a corpse of a murdered man, in an isolated cabin in the Far North, as an ordinary, everyday occurrence.

The Mountie took two strides forward, slamming the door. He did not cast a glance at the silent figure sprawled on the rough boards, but kept his eyes fastened on the man he

had surprised. His eyes gleamed hungrily, his voice rasped.

"I've waited for over a week for your visit. Guess you knew this shack was being watched, so had to wait for a break in the weather—waited for a blizzard before you risked coming back to get the gold."

"I don't know anything at all about any gold," was the curt response.

"No?" The trooper's tone was sarcastic. Pushing back the hood of his coat, he revealed the doubting grin on his face. "Guess I'll have to remind you then, eh?"

The other man shrugged, but his eyes were far from disinterested; they were gleaming coldly, taking in every expression on the Mountie's face.

"Well, I'm Constable Phelan, Mahoona Post, Nahanni River, and for weeks I've been trying to run down a bird who's been committing a lot of robberies in this district. I think I've got him, and this time it looks as if you went a bit too far." His eyes hardened. "Slip these on; I'm tired of holding this damned gun." He dangled a pair of handcuffs.

Menaced by cold eyes and threatening pistol, the other man obeyed. Holstering his own weapon, the policeman swiftly frisked his prisoner, relieving him of a heavy revolver. He

grinned again as he slammed the man into a chair.

"Now sit tight while I 'tend to your dogs and load and bring up my own, then we'll pow-wow some more." Turning about, he left the building.

As the door closed, manacled though he was, the prisoner moved rapidly. From beneath his coat he produced a knife. Swiftly he closely scrutinised the logs that composed the four walls; a satisfied grunt escaped him as his eyes saw what he sought.

Eagerly he bored into a log. With spittle and brisk rubbing with his coat-sleeve he obliterated all signs of his handiwork. He had just time to slip something into the rolled edge of his high socks and the knife back into his pocket, when the Mountie re-entered the cabin.

Phelan wore the air of a man well satisfied with his day's work. He was burdened with bedding and other stuff from both loads. With a grunt he dropped his bundles on the floor, straightened up and grinned triumphantly at his captive.

"I'll examine the victim later," he grinned; "first I'll get a fire going and lamps lit." He suited the actions to the words; the prisoner sat quietly watching him.

"There, that's more like it." Lights and fire glowing, the constable shed his heavy furs. "Now let's take another squint at old Fred Cutts." He stooped over the recumbent form. "Dead as a petrified tree," he announced as he stood erect. "Got anything to say?"

"A lot," was the even reply. "Without any investigation, just because you happen along and find me stooped over a dead man, you arrest me and accuse me of murder and robbery. You damned fool! That man's been dead at least a week; the corpse is frozen solid."

"Sure." Constable Phelan sat down heavily. "I found him eight days ago right after he'd been shot. I was within a mile of this shack and I hears a shot.

I touches off my own gun, thinking maybe someone was signalling, and my dogs give tongue. Guess it put the wind up the killer and he beat it without touching the gold he was after. Everyone in this district knew old Fred had a good cache."

"YOU'RE A LIAR!"

He broke off, stared grimly from the prisoner to the corpse and back again.

"At first I was for following the killer; then, as it was nigh dark and beginning to snow afore I'd finished investigation, I figured that wouldn't be no good. Especially"—he leaned forward and glared at the other man—"as I found the gold and so knew you'd come back.

"So I makes camp near-by, keeps my dogs muzzled so's they can't give warning, and sets down to wait. And it paid me to; I've caught you with the goods. When I was outside I searched your cariole and this was in your bed-roll." He tossed a buckskin pouch on the table. Eyeing the prisoner coldly, he added: "Guess old Fred came back and caught you, eh? That's why you shot."

"A likely yarn, Mr. Mountie." The prisoner's lips curled. "What a credit to the Force you are! Too damned lazy to work on a case, you prefer to jump to conclusions." He glared at the policeman and added, his voice metallic: "And on top of it all you're a liar."

"What the——" Phelan lurched to his feet, his figure bulking threateningly over the other man. The prisoner's eyes showed no fear.

"I repeat that you are a liar." His eyes bored into the Mountie's. Phelan sat down again, shuffling uneasily.

"Them's strong words," he growled, "but say your piece."

"You say you found that pouch in my load. If you were close enough to this building to watch my every movement, you know damned well that I haven't left this building since I

entered." He shrugged and stared at the policeman with quizzical eyes. "What's in the bag?" he asked.

"Quite a nice bit in dust and nuggets," gloated the trooper; "and I'm repeating, I watched you come into this shack, I gives you time to locate old Fred's cache and hide the gold on your sled, then I showed myself."

The prisoner frowned thoughtfully, his eyes still fixed on the constable's face.

"I don't quite get your game, Mountie, unless your trying to frame me, looking for an easy pinch and promotion. Why make me the goat?"

"Goat?" Phelan's face became purple as he swung savagely on his prisoner. "Where'd you get that 'goat' stuff? I've caught you with the goods. Listen to this and try and explain your way out of it." Extending his fingers, he checked off his points:

"I've watched this cabin for eight days and you're the first man who's come nigh it. Know why? Because it's 'way off the main ice trail, is 'way out of sight of the river. Old Fred didn't have many visitors; he didn't want 'em. Yet"—he leaned forward eagerly—"even in a heavy blizzard you, a stranger in these parts, finds it. Why did you call—there's grub a-plenty on your load?" He paused, the other man did not answer.

"What's your name? What are you doing in these parts? And I'm willing to swear on a stack of Bibles that I found this pouch of gold in your load, and the pouch has Fred's brand on it. And what about your gun? It's the same bore as the one the killer used—I measured the hole."

The prisoner drew a deep breath.

"That's your case. Now listen to my alibis. I'm on a secret mission for a wealthy outfit; they brought me and my dog-team in by air about two weeks ago and dropped me on the ice of Ruffled Lake. Among other things I had to get some photos; guess you saw the camera on my outfit. I called here

because I was instructed to do so, as we knew that the dead man had a good claim here."

The Mountie looked uncomfortable.

"You mean you're one of these scouts for a big mining outfit? I know they are dropping their scouts all over the north." He paused, his brows knitted in sudden thought. Abruptly his lips twisted into a thin smile. Crossing to the side of his prisoner, he swiftly turned out every pocket. His smile broadened.

"You had me worried for a minute; but, if you're a scout for a mining syndicate, where's your papers?" He indicated a small pile of belongings on the table. "Not even a letter, nothing to show who or what you are."

He chuckled aloud:

"Makes it look worse, don't it? You're just one of these bozoes who hang around this country trying to pick up what you can at cards and dice. Guess your luck was out and you turns sneak-thief. Remember the gold I found on your load."

It was the prisoner's turn to look uneasy; noting it, the constable chuckled afresh.

"Your luck's out and mine's in. Guess I did the wise thing in laying doggo and watching the shack. What's your name?" he ended.

Again the prisoner drew in a deep breath.

"You're away off trail, Mountie. When a man's on a secret mission for a big outfit, he don't go about placarded with identification papers. Neither"—he glared at the policeman—"does he give his name to every nosey Mountie he meets, see? I'll answer all your questions in my own good time, but it won't be to your satisfaction."

"Bluff." Phelan sneered the word. The prisoner spoke further.

"Supposing no one had called, Mountie, how would you have found a goat?"

Phelan scowled savagely.

"I took that chance, see? **Luck plays**

a big part in solving crimes. If you hadn't called we'd have had all our fellows a-hunting you."

"You'd have known the man to look for?" The prisoner's tone was sneering.

Again Phelan scowled

"I was going to wait until my grub run out, then if you hadn't showed up I'd have reported to my post like I told you." His scowl changed to a grin. "But my luck was in."

The other man considered this.

"You are quite certain it isn't a suicide case?"

"Suicide?" The Mountie pointed to the body. "No powder burns, see, prove he was shot from a bit of a distance. Right between the eyes. Suicides don't shoot themselves between the eyes. Bullet made a clean hole, same size back and front. Close quarters would have blown half the skull away." He smiled tauntingly. "Guess it's you for the seven-foot drop."

A grim smile shadowed the other man's features.

"Yes, I noticed the clean bullet-hole. Why not find the bullet and see if it fits my gun? Measurements don't tell you anything."

THE FATAL BULLET



An uneasy light showed in the Mountie's eyes; he stared about the shack and got to his feet.

"I didn't look for that bullet," he volunteered,

"because I figure Fred was standing right in the open doorway when he was plugged and the bullet went on out." He eyed the prisoner uneasily. "Guess the bullet don't matter much," he muttered, as if to himself.

"Don't matter?" The prisoner's

voice was raised. "It might hang the real murderer, Mountie, and save me from the gallows. Still, even if I did shoot this man, you'll have one hell of a time proving it; circumstantial evidence don't carry much weight. It's just your word against mine. The best way to get a conviction is to get the suspect to overtalk himself, and I'm not doing that, see?"

The constable grunted. The prisoner added:

"Well, even men accused of murder must eat; let's cover up the body, get a meal and have some sleep. And take these damned things off." He extended his wrists. "I want to shed my furs."

"Guess it's safe enough to." The trooper grinned, fumbled for the key. "I'm bigger than you and well armed; you can't get away."

"I promise you I won't try to," was the grim reply. "I'm anxious to trail in with you, I'm going to get a real kick out of watching you try to hang this on me. And, Mountie, you're going to be damned sorry that you tried to hang this on to me, see if you're not."

Phelan merely grunted and busied himself getting a meal.

Four days later Sergeant Morritt, in charge of the Mahoona Post, stood in the compound staring through binoculars at an aeroplane droning above. "One of ours all right," he muttered as he lowered the glasses, "wonder if the old duck'll land here this time?"

His question was quickly answered as the plane, its propeller whistling idly, whirled swiftly downwards and swooped to a perfect three-ski landing on the river ice. The sergeant hastened towards it as fast as a sore foot would let him. He stiffened to attention as a bulky, fur-clad figure clambered out of the cabin. It was the superintendent from Edmonton. Greetings exchanged, the two men made their way to the barracks, leaving the pilot to ice anchor the ship.

"Wonderful inventions, aeroplanes."

The superintendent, comfortably sprawled in a chair by the stove, commenced to fill his pipe. "Just imagine, Sergeant," he went on reminiscently, "it's twelve hundred miles from here to my district headquarters at Edmonton. Used to take me six weeks by dog-team, two by boat; yet to-day I ramped up here in a little over eight hours." He puffed contemplatively. "I'm very glad the government came to life and put the Mounted in the air."

"Yes, sir," Sergeant Morritt waited patiently. The super suddenly leaned forward, his eyes bored into the sergeant's.

"Well, Morritt, any fresh developments?"

"No, sir. Phelan is not back yet, but I expect him any time." The sergeant's tone became aggrieved. "And I thought, sir, that you'd have sent another man up to help Phelan, as this sore foot of mine's had me tied to the post ever since I froze it. It goes back on me again every time I hit the trail; guess it won't get real better till warm weather's here."

"Ah, yes, your foot." A shadow of a smile swept over the super's face. "It is almost two months since you reported that to me, but you know, Sergeant, we are very short-handed, one man to every hundred thousand square miles or thereabouts."

He puffed reflectively.

"Then right after you were laid up this series of robberies in your district commenced. Bet you have been fussing and fuming about it."

"Yes, sir, it's been hell," growled the sergeant.

"M'm!" The super nodded his sympathy. "But, Morritt, I have been helping you—I've kept the wireless busy and have run up a huge gas and oil bill for the government to foot. Planes soak up fuel like a Mountie on furlough." He leaned forward abruptly, his keen eyes alight with a cold gleam.

"Right after you reported these robberies, Sergeant, I checked over the list

of residents in this district. Thanks to the wireless and rapid means of transportation, we can now discard to a great extent the crude trail-your-man-till-you-catch-'im methods and use a little deductive reasoning and hypothesis."

He leaned back in his chair. "Not relieving you, Morritt, was part of a plan I conjured up; I wanted the culprit to feel a false sense of security."

"Yes, sir." Morritt's tone was somewhat mollified. "But you've flown over the post quite a few times lately, sir, yet this is the first time you've landed."

"Part of my plan, Morritt. I didn't want to scare the guilty man—I wanted to catch him red-handed, wanted him to grow careless. But more of that later. You've kept the Indian here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Bring him in."

The sergeant limped away on his errand, returning a few minutes later accompanied by a native. The superintendent motioned both men to be seated; he addressed the Indian. "Tell me the story you told the sergeant."

"Two, mebbe t'ree weeks ago, mushin' 'long nearby Fred Cutts's cabin. Gun 'e speak quick close-by. Sneak up to shack an' peek in winder. By cripes!" The native crossed himself hurriedly. "See ol' Fred lyin' on floor all bunched up like. T'ink mebbe I go aroun' to door an' 'elp. Just t'en someone move in shack an' bend over Fred. I t'ink mebbe it's man who shot Fred an' gets scared like 'ell, by cripes. I mush away like 'ell an' hunt for Mounties."

"M'm!" The superintendent eyed the native keenly. "You didn't see the man's face—notice how he was dressed? You couldn't recognise him again?"

"No, by cripes." The Indian's eyes became round. "An' mebbe if I 'ad stayed to get a good look 'e'd 'a' shot me too, eh?"

"Can you beat it for luck?" The sergeant cursed and appealed to the super.

"An eye-witness to a shooting and he runs away!"

The superintendent nodded.

"But had he stayed, Morritt, I bet there'd have been two corpses and no eye-witness. Also, you would not have known and would not have been able to let me know. I think the native did the best thing in rushing to this post. And, as Phelan was away and you were laid up, I had to do something—so I did."

PHELAN'S TRAIL

The entrance of the pilot interrupted him. In silence the other three men watched the airman thawing himself out by the stove. The super spoke again.

"What do you suppose is delaying Phelan?"

"Well, sir, he was due to call at Cutts's cabin on routine patrol just about the time of the killing. I've been hoping that he struck a warm trail."

"He's a good man, is he?"

"Damn good, especially for a new man. He's been doing double patrols ever since I was laid up and hasn't squawked once. And that reminds me, sir." Morritt leaned forward.

"I think the man we want is an old-timer in this district—knows Phelan is green and knows I'm laid up. He seems to trail Phelan. The constable strikes a cabin and finds a note saying that the owner's away for a few days and for callers to make themselves at home. Phelan maybe stays overnight, then goes his way leaving all okay.

"Right after he leaves the place is robbed. As soon as he gets word he doubles back, but by then there's been no trail to follow as the thief seems to have used Phelan's own trail. A damned clever stunt, but he's done it so often I feel certain that only one man is responsible for all the robberies."

"And the murder," The super nodded grimly. "It looks as if the robber was surprised and shot to save himself. It isn't hard to find a suspect,

Sergeant, but it's damned hard to procure a conviction. I never make an arrest until I am dead sure I'll also get a conviction."

Getting to his feet he strolled to a window and stared out for a few minutes in thoughtful silence. Without turning round he said:

"I believe in giving a man a fair chance, but if Phelan hasn't anything to report when he arrives, I'll have to visit the murder scene myself."

"I wonder you haven't already done that, sir." Morritt's tone was questioning. "It's only about a hundred miles from here; why not let's all go?" He jerked eagerly to his feet.

"And put the culprit wise?" The super turned round and resumed his seat. "No, Sergeant, I'm employing stratagem—meeting cunning with cunning. But I feel sure Phelan will arrive to-day; that's why I stayed over."

"To-day we sighted two teams and two men away down the river; through my glasses I recognised one of the men. They should be here any time now."

"You think it was Phelan and a prisoner?" Morritt's eyes glowed with eagerness.

"Yes." The super's voice lowered. "And when he arrives, leave everything to me. I'm an old hand at trapping suspects into giving themselves away; I try to get 'em to over-talk. It's a sort of guilty urge they can't control if you are pleasant with them." He broke off and stared into the glowing fire. In silence the four men waited.

"I ACCUSE——"



Two trail-weary men and ten equally tired dogs swung round the bend in the river that brought them in sight of

the Mahoona Post. Both men stared hard at the huge aeroplane moored on the ice.

His breath clouds of steam, Constable Phelan panted to his prisoner, trotting alongside:

"I told you the plane that sailed over us was one of ours; I bet it's the super from Edmonton."

He chuckled grimly.

"It'll speed things up a bit. Guess he'll take us both back with him. That'll be fine—I want a trip outside." The prisoner did not reply.

A last scrambling rush up the steep river-bank, a chorus of yelps and curses, and men and animals halted in the compound. The superintendent leading, the four men emerged to meet them. The chief's eyes fell on the canvas-covered form lashed on one cariole.

"What's all this, Constable? What have you on your load?"

"The body of a man known as Fred Cutts, sir," was the answer. "And I accuse this man—he refuses to give his name—of murdering him." He touched the prisoner.

"You charge this man with murder?" The super eyed the prisoner sharply, even as the sergeant and the Indian uncovered the body. The super turned and stooped over the corpse, examining it carefully. Straightening up he again addressed the constable:

"You have disarmed this man, of course?"

"Yes, sir." Hastily Phelan handed over the revolver and cartridges that he had taken from his captive. The superintendent examined them closely. Again he bent over the corpse and eyed the tiny, blue-edged hole in the dead forehead. He shook his head doubtfully and again turned to the constable.

"It looks as if you have been working hard on this case, Phelan; but why did you arrest this man? What evidence have you?"

Hastily Phelan explained, ending:

"And I found this in his load, sir."

He handed over the pouch of gold. Eyeing it, the super again shook his head.

"You have questioned the man?"

"Yes, sir, and his alibis are flimsy."

Again that doubtful head wagging.

"But so is your evidence, constable. Surely you have more proof? You, of course, have the bullet that passed through the victim's head?"

"No, sir." Phelan fidgeted beneath the keen gaze. "The door was swinging wide open and I figured the bullet had passed on out. There were no other clues, sir, but I caught the man practically red-handed."

"M'm!" The super turned to the prisoner and eyed him steadily. "What have you to say?"

The man fumbled in a pocket and extended a smashed piece of lead.

"Here is the bullet that killed Cutts. I dug it out of a log over the doorway. I hid it in my sock when the constable searched me. It will prove, sir, with other evidence, who killed Cutts."

"What?" Phelan started forward. "Why, sir——" The super silenced him and asked the prisoner: "Anything else?"

"Yes, sir; the constable did not find that pouch of gold in my load."

"Sir!"—Phelan again lunged forward—"I swear I did."

The prisoner swung to face him.

"You swear that you thoroughly searched my load and found that pouch of gold in it?"

"Yes." Phelan's face was purple.

The prisoner's action was surprising. Swiftly he commenced to unlash the stuff on his sled and dump it in the snow. Watched by five pairs of staring eyes, he drew his knife and slashed at the moose-hide sheathing on the flooring, then abruptly turned the cariole bottom-side up. Heaving it to one side, he displayed to his audience a little pile of buckskin pouches on the snow.

Phelan was the first to find his voice.

"What the——?" He stared at the heap of pouches with dilated eyes.

"Why, sir, see the brands? This man appears to have the entire proceeds of all the robberies." He grinned and turned to the super: "Guess that's proof enough—eh, sir?"

"You bet it's proof." The prisoner whirled on the constable. "It took a lot of work on my part to find the robber's cache, but I did find it. Then I mushed up to Cutts's cabin, to find you waiting for me as I expected."

"Expected? Find the robber's cache?" Phelan's face was a study. He grinned afresh. "Why, that amounts to a confession, and we all heard it!"

"Does it?" A hard smile flashed for a second. "You're forgetting the bullet."

The constable stared blankly as the super cut in.

"Yes, this bullet." He again bent over the corpse. Straightening up, he gazed at the constable with speculative eyes. "Phelan, you have fallen down on the job very badly. You haven't any real clues at all, and you overlooked the most important one—this bullet."

"Why, sir." The constable floundered badly. "He had it hidden in his sock and the gold was also hidden—you saw that."

"No excuse." The super shook his head. "The Mounted pride themselves on their thoroughness; you haven't been very thorough. You just camped by the shack, grabbed the first man that entered, and tried to concoct evidence. You've wasted a lot of time."

Phelan shuffled uneasily and his tone became sullen.

"Well, sir, we don't get many travellers in these parts, and this man won't explain what he's doing up here or how he came to find Cutts's shack in a blizzard."

"You are sure that you found this pouch of gold in this man's load?"

"Yes." Phelan's tone was sullen; he glared at the prisoner. "I watched him go into the shack and come out with it. He didn't take the time then to hide it between the sheathing. Then he went

back into the shack again, to hunt for that bullet, I guess. I think, sir, he's trying to get away with a big bluff. He's got a lot to explain."

"M'm!" The superintendent stared hard at the constable. "Yet that bullet is a point in his favour." His tone suddenly became harsh. "Let me see your gun!"

"HE'S NOT GUILTY"

For a second the constable hesitated—then, a surprised expression on his face, he unholstered the weapon and handed it over. The super extracted the shells and did likewise with the gun taken from the prisoner. Dropping both weapons to the snow, he held out for inspection the little pile of bullets in his hand.

"See the difference? Cartridges from the prisoner's gun are the usual, steel-jacketed, soft-nosed type of sporting bullets. Our service bullets, manufactured for use against human targets, are more humane; they are steel-encased to their tips. They do not smash, but drill a clean hole. The bullet that killed Cutts, as you must have noticed, drilled a clean hole."

"But——" Phelan swayed unsteadily and stared dazedly about him—"why, the bore of the prisoner's gun is the same as our service guns, and maybe he carried some all-steel cartridges. Good God, sir, I bet that's what he did!" It was almost a shout.

"Isn't it odd, then, that his other shells are the usual sporting ones? Is it feasible that a murderer would carry in his pocket the bullet that did the deed?" The superintendent's voice was level, his every word edged.

"No, sir." In spite of the cold, tiny beads of sweat showed above Phelan's eyebrows. "God, sir, but we're dealing with a tricky fellow." He turned on the prisoner. "What's your game? Prove why you're up here or admit you're guilty."

The superintendent intervened.

"I'll interrogate him, Constable, not you. But I have proof right here that he is not guilty. You presented a plausible case, but not a convincing one. You've fallen down badly."

"Hell!" Phelan swung savagely on his superior officer. "You believe him against me, eh? I buck long trails, camp out in this damned cold, and all I get is a bawling out." His face became purple and he stepped forward threateningly.

"All right, then, I've failed. As a cop I'm a wash-out. All right, then, I'm through, see? I've never liked this hard graft for two bucks a day, so right now I'm telling you that you can keep this damned uniform." He leered at the superintendent.

"A 'damned' uniform, eh?" The super's face hardened. "For that you'll ride out with me and get discharged. You've talked your way out of the Force, Phelan. I gave you every chance, but you wouldn't take it."

The muscles at the angles of the super's jaws stood out in ridges. He continued, addressing the sergeant:

"You will arrest Phelan for insolence to a superior officer. You will see that he is closely guarded until I am ready to take him outside with me."

"What the——!" The constable jerked frantic eyes about him; his face had become curiously grey. Curses commenced to spill from his lips. "Cut it!" The sergeant lunged forward, grabbing his arm.

"Come on!"

Flanked by Morritt and the pilot, a sneering grin on his lips, Phelan was led away.

THE ODD SKUNK

The superintendent and the pilot, together with the sergeant and the stranger, were grouped about the stove after supper. The sergeant turned an inquiring gaze on his superior officer.

"I'm still puzzled, sir, and I'd like you to explain as you promised."

The super glanced around and made sure that the Indian was not present. His tone grim, he began:

"I suspected Phelan almost from the first. He's a new man, and, in spite of all precautions, the odd skunk slips into our uniform—although he doesn't usually last very long."

"But——" interrupted the sergeant. The super silenced him with a raised hand.

"I decided that if my suspicions were correct, it would have been worse than useless to have sent another uniformed man to this post. The robberies would then have simply stopped."

"But——" again the sergeant interrupted; his eyes were dilated with horror. "Good God, sir! What do you mean? Phelan? You don't think——?" His voice tailed off; then: "Isn't he under arrest merely for insubordination?"

"What?" The super's tone was curt. "Lord, no! That was just a bluff. He saw he had lost as soon as he saw the gold; now all he wants is to get a quick trip outside and his discharge."

"But your proof?" The sergeant also raised his voice. "How do we know this man isn't guilty—hasn't told a lot of lies?" He indicated the stranger.

A grim smile flickered over the super's lips.

"For several reasons. In the first place he is a tried man; he has been on the strength for years. Let me introduce Sergeant Sparling of our secret investigation department."

"Good Lor'!" Sergeant Morritt jerked upright in his chair and glared at the other man. Sparling grinned and nodded. The super resumed.

"Suspecting Phelan, I worked out a scheme of my own to trap him—brought Sparling and a dog-team up here by plane and dropped him on the line of Phelan's patrol beat.

"It took Sparling quite a time to locate the robber's cache. He camped close by to try to get some photos for evidence. Then the murder took place.

I flew in and told Sparling about it. We hazarded what the killer's subsequent actions would be and guessed right.

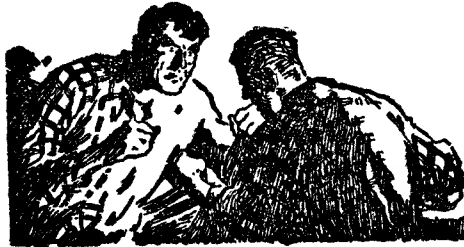
"I couldn't fly Sparling to the dead man's shack, as that would have given the game away. He mushed to it with his dogs, and had just arrived when Phelan jumped him. Phelan thought he'd caught a chance wayfarer he could tie the crime to."

The sergeant whistled.

"And the scheme would have worked with a stranger, too."

"Yes." The super nodded. "A Mountie's word would have carried a lot of weight in a court of law. However, thanks to Sparling here, we've trapped the killer."

"No." Sparling smiled. "Not because of my work, sir, but thanks to the super's stratagem."



The Uncounted Factor

The Perfectly Planned Robbery and What Upset the Plan

MELCHER roughly shoved the muzzle of the pistol into the sleeping man's chest, and as the sleeper opened his eyes he blinded him with the beam from his flashlight.

"Get up!" Melcher gestured, for he knew that the man on the cot was stone deaf. In fact, the store-keeper-postmaster's deafness was one of the biggest factors on his side, Melcher reckoned, for it had allowed him to break into this far north trading-post without being heard. Also Gardner, the man now at his mercy, would be unable to hear and recognise his voice. And a mask covered Melcher's eyes and forehead, while his clothing was no different from that worn by most northerners, when off the trails. There was no danger of Gardner recognising him either by voice or appearance.

A malignant smile twisting the lips that showed beneath the mask, Melcher watched the man on the cot struggle to a sitting position.

"Say, what is this—a hold-up?" Gardner blinked sleep-dazed eyes, tried to peer behind the flash-light's beam. "It's no use your saying anything, because I'm stone deaf. Wait till I put my ear-pieces on." Regardless of the threatening automatic he reached for an apparatus that lay on a small table beside the bed.



Melcher, his evil grin widening, forestalled the trader. With one swift motion of his gun-hand he swept the apparatus on to the floor and reduced it to wreckage with grinding feet.

His action caused the other man to cry out in genuine anguish.

"Damn you!" The trader's face went livid. "Why'd you do that! It'll be weeks afore I can get another one from the outside."

Melcher grinned, then ordered harshly:

"Get up and open that safe."

He swung the flash-light towards a corner, kept the pistol boring down on the other man.

Slowly Gardner scrambled from the bed, muttering savagely:

"Got to have more light," he said, as he stood erect. "That flash ain't enough."

He found matches and lit a table-lamp.

Melcher made no attempt to interfere, for they did need more light. There was no chance of Gardner's recognising him, and as it was after midnight and storming heavily outside there was slight chance of any of the other residents of the tiny settlement noticing the faint lamplight.

Even if they did they would see no reason for coming over to investigate; no, not even Corporal Blaney, now, no doubt, snoring lustily in the police barracks, a bare two hundred yards away. The blizzard; Gardner's deafness. They were both factors Melcher had reckoned on helping him. He grinned afresh as, the lamp glowing, Gardner turned and faced him.

For a space the two men eyed one another in silence, while Melcher allowed his morbid temperament to enjoy the drama of the situation to the full. His lips continued to twitch, his eyes glinted evilly through the slits in the cloth that served for a mask. Gardner stared with the penetrating gaze of a man whose full faculties were stimulated by danger. The trader broke the brief silence.

"I'm stone-deaf, like I told you. Write down what you want me to do."

Again Melcher laughed, a laugh that held no humour. Some queer twist in his make-up allowed him to enjoy the helplessness of the sore-afflicted trader. Sneeringly he spoke:

"Write it down so's you'll have a copy of my handwritin', eh? You must think me a dub." He gestured savagely towards the steel box. "Open the safe!" he ordered harshly.

For an instant Gardner hesitated. Melcher lifted the gun until it scowled full into the storekeeper's eyes. Muttering to himself, Gardner dropped to his knees in front of the steel door.

The faint clicking noise as he whirled the tumblers mingled with the moan and whine of the storm, the soft sifting of the snow on roof and walls. Came

a louder click and a soft swish of air and the door of the safe swung wide.

Melcher's eyes glinted with greed as he stared over Gardner's shoulders, peered into the interior of the metal box, saw the booty he was after. It was a canvas-covered parcel some eighteen inches long and a foot in width and depth.

Melcher knew that it contained a fortune in currency. Reaching out he grasped the heavy parcel and slammed it upon the table. He then turned his attention to Gardner, who was still kneeling beside the safe.

In obedience to fresh gestures emphasised by the heavy gun, the storekeeper put his hands behind him. In minutes he was trussed hand and foot and flung upon the bed. Lying there helpless he eyed Melcher steadily with eyes that glowed with savage mortification. There was no fear in his glance, nor in his words or voice when he spoke.

"You're the biggest fool I ever met," he said, "if you think you can get away with armed robbery up here. And you're also robbing the mails."

GREED

Melcher did not reply; he had laid down the pistol and was ripping the wrappings from one end of the parcel. He licked his lips greedily as there was revealed to his eyes thousands of crisp, new, tightly-packed notes. A fortune! Gardner's eyes were also on the money. He spoke again.

"You know what the money is, do you? It's the annual Treaty money, nearly fifty thousand dollars in ones, twos and fives. You'll have every native in these parts volunteering to help hunt you down when they hear their cash is gone." He paused as if awaiting a reply, his burning eyes on Melcher's face, then went on:

"That money parcel weighs nigh on to forty pounds. You can't hide that on

a cariole and make it outside over the ice trail, and you daren't try to spend it up here. You can't spend it, you can't take it outside, you can't hide it. Man, you're a fool!"

"Ye-ah?" Melcher had barely heard the words. Now he was re-wrapping the money. "Sure; give the Mounties a trail to foller an' they sometimes get their man." He chuckled aloud. "But the way it's storming I won't leave no trail." He stopped at that as he suddenly remembered the store-keeper could not hear a word. Gardner's reply proved that.

"I can't hear what you say, but I'm thinking you must be a resident of these parts, otherwise, how'd you know that money arrived in the mail yesterday? Yet, no real northerner would be fool enough to try and pull off a hold-up here. A few greenhorns have tried it; now they're either in jail or their carcasses are rotting."

"Ye-ah?" Melcher sneered, paused in the act of dousing the light, and stared at Gardner lying there on the bed. "Think I can't get away with it, eh? Hell, feller, I've been dopin' this out for weeks." A harsh chuckle followed his words and that cruel streak in his nature prompted him to taunt the trader afresh, talk to a man who would agonisingly strive to hear his words—and be unable to.

And for weeks in the solitude of his cabin and line-shacks and whilst snow-shoeing along his trap-lines, Melcher had been perfecting his plans for this robbery. Lonely days and nights of scheming and mental strain. Now he was in possession of the money and was also filled with a wild urge to talk—to boast. As he glared down at Gardner he chuckled again. Well, now he could ease his taunt nerves by talking, knowing that the man he spoke to could not hear one word. Yes, he would unload his mind and thus ease the strain.

Another harsh chuckle issued from

his twitching lips. He leered down at the man on the bed.

"Feller!" He patted the money parcel under his arm. "You're all wrong. I can hide this money on my cariole an' I'm goin' outside over the ice-trail. Soon's this robbery's known the Mounties'll be turnin' all travellers inside out. They'll search me an' my load, but they won't find the money."

"And I can't hear one word." The deaf man groaned deeply, but kept his burning eyes on what he could see of Melcher's face. Again Melcher chuckled.

"An' don't I know it. I'm enjoyin' aggravatin' you like this. Sorta gives a kick to this hold-up. An' you're right, feller, I am a resident of these parts. My main shack's at the far end of Loon Lake, not more'n five miles from here. I was right here in this store when the mail came in yesterday. Can you beat it?" He grinned in boastful glee.

Again the man on the bed groaned:

"But you can't get away with it. You can't hide a forty-fifty pound money parcel on a cariole. You're a fool, I tell you."

The grimly-confident tones touched Melcher's vanity, stung him to boasting further.

"I can't, eh?" He snarled the query. "I'm tellin' you this is the slickest robbery the North's ever known. I ain't leavin' nothin' to chance. When I leaves here I heads through the timber to one of my line-shacks, not right across the lake to my main cabin, in case the storm blows over afore I get there. At my line-shack I'll hide the money. Then I heads for my main cabin and hits it about sundown to-morrer. The next mornin' I heads for the outside. I might stop here for a few supplies. Ain't it rich?" Again he chuckled, exultantly, boastfully.

"And I can't hear a word. Guess that's why you busted my ear-phones, eh?" Gardner's eye gleamed savagely,

then: "But I still don't see how you can hide that money."

"An' I'm tellin' you I can. I've got it all doped out." Melcher snarled the words; that oft-repeated statement was getting on his nerves.

"You can't hide that amount of money on your person or on a sled." There was a mocking light in Gardner's eyes, a taunt in his voice. Melcher forgot all caution. Rage boiled up in him.

"I'm tellin' you I can. Know how?"

"I can't hear a word, damn you." Gardner's eyes were gleaming strangely. "You can't——"

"Shut up!" It was a threat. "I'm takin' this money out on a cariole, spread out an' hid beneath the double moose-hide sheathin' of a nice new cariole I've made me. It'll be hidden where they'll never think of lookin' for it. Once outside it'll be easy to spend small notes. Now I'll fix you so's you can't say again that I can't get away with it."

A savage leer on his face, he ripped off a strip of blanket and fashioned a rough gag. Stepping back he surveyed his handiwork. Until someone came along in the morning Gardner was helpless. Still grinning, Melcher doused the light, slipped out into the night and padded softly to where his team was tethered.

HIDING THE BOOTY



In seconds he had lashed the money parcel on to the sled, had untied the animals and urged them into a trot away from the post and towards the dense timber.

For three hours he fought his way through the blackness and the storm, licking greedily at frost-rimmed lips each time he thought of the fortune in

currency lashed on to the swaying sled. The storm was a powerful ally; there'd be no sign of a trail for Corporal Blaney to pick up at daybreak. And Gardner would have no clues to offer. Grim satisfaction filled Melcher as he mushed behind the animals.

Arrived at his shack, he swiftly unharnessed the dogs, then hauled the sled bodily into the one room of the building. With quick, practised movements he got a lamp lighted and the fire going, then, shedding his furs, settled to the most cunning part of his whole plan—the hiding of the currency.

For almost an hour he worked at the business of concealing the money, hiding it in the last place a Mountie would think of finding it, and as he worked his face became a mask of cunning greed.

Turning the sled over on its side he carefully unlashed the moose-side sheathing that covered the floor framework of the flat-bottomed, Mackenzie river-type cariole. Spreading open the hide he ripped open the money parcels and spread the notes evenly upon the hide in thin piles of tens. There was ample space for them all.

Placing the two pieces of hide together again he relashed the whole business to the wooden framework. The moosehide was thick and tough and gave no hint of what it concealed. It was a neat job. And Melcher's satisfaction increased when he noted that no matter how slowly he ran his fingers over the sheathing he could feel no bulges. Neither did the notes crackle. His next act was to carefully burn the money parcel wrappings. Then he seated himself beside the glowing stove and mentally reviewed the whole matter.

He had been in the district for over a year now, doing a little prospecting in summer and trapping in winter. But times had been tough. Fur both scarce and away down in price. Naturally greedy, the hard times had caused his soured mind to mull over other ways

and means of cleaning up a stake.

Purely by chance, from odd remarks dropped by natives and whites about the settlement, he had learned about the annual Treaty money. Since then he had gone out of his way to scrape acquaintance with old Zeb Chabot, who ran the mail route. By judicious pumping he had learned from the mail-runner how the money was wrapped by the bank in Edmonton and shipped by ordinary registered mail and entirely without a guard other than the mail-carrier. Zeb had boasted that in twenty years he had never lost a dollar, had stated that only a damn fool would risk a lengthy prison sentence by trying to rob the mails.

And in the Far North an attempted robbery would be doubly foolish, for the only way to travel to the outside was via the rivers; dog-teams in winter-time and boats in summer-time. And Mounted Police posts were scattered all along the rivers at advantageous spots. Zeb had ended by telling him the exact date he would be bringing the money through and had chucklingly challenged him to hold him up.

Melcher had joined in the old runner's grim joke. He had realised the utter folly of trying to get the money in that way. But the obsession to obtain the cash grew the more he thought about it. Enough to make him independent for life.

Then he had thought of the scheme now almost carried through to a successful conclusion. And the deafness of Gardner had been one of the biggest factors for safety in the whole scheme. Breaking into the stoutly-built post without awakening the trader had been half the battle. Thinking up a hiding-place for the money had been another big item. And the storm coming so soon after the arrival of the cash, had been a tremendous ally.

Seated there in front of the stove and conning it all over, Melcher felt the glow of satisfaction increase. As far

as he could see he had committed a flawless crime. Getting to his feet he blew out the light, then threw himself upon a rough bunk.

A grin of smug satisfaction was on his face as he dropped off to sleep. He had counted every factor; had not overlooked a thing. He was sure of that.

He slept calmly, not knowing that in a few hours he would encounter a contingency he had not reckoned with: the uncounted factor.

THE UNCOUNTED FACTOR

The shadows of late afternoon were softly mantling the white wastes. With the coming of daylight the storm had abated, but had piled the snow in drifts and winnows that made traveling arduous. Since early morning Melcher had been breaking trail for his dogs. Now the animals were lying in the snow behind him as, from the shelter of the evergreens at the edge of the clearing where stood his home cabin, he cautiously surveyed the scene.

In front of the cabin were fresh tracks in the new snow. Sucking in a swift breath, he lifted his eyes to the stove-pipe sticking out, mast-like, through the sod of the room. His eyes darted to the dazzlingly white levels of Loon Lake.

The virgin snow-covered surface showed snow-shoe tracks. They led straight across the ice from the small settlement. Melcher grinned, even as he guessed who had made those tracks. Corporal Blaney had no doubt started on the trail of the robber, had commenced the wearisome game of length patrols, quiet searching of cabins, interrogation of all residents and a checking-up of their recent movements.

He had headed first for Melcher's cabin; a natural thing to do, for the cabin commanded a wide view of the lake and surrounding countryside.

Like a weather-beaten statue, Melcher stood there. His eyes darted back to the chimney and his lips tightened grimly as he saw a wisp of smoke trailing from the pipe. A spasm of uneasiness shook him as he stared; then he braced himself. He had nothing to fear, all he had to do was to guard his answers to the inevitable questions the keen-eyed Mountie would shoot at him. A command to the dogs and he strode forward, unaware that a pair of mocking, glaring eyes were watching him from the shelter of the woodpile at the rear of the building.

Halting in front of the building, he pushed open the slab door and entered. At first, in the gloom of the one-window cabin, he could not make out the features of the man who got to his feet as he re-closed the door. He saw it was the Mountie. He grinned a greeting even though that spasm of fear again shot through him. But Corporal Blaney's attitude was casual.

"Gad!" The corporal yawned, peered at him. "It's you, Melcher, eh? Gad! I guess I must have dozed off, fell asleep while on the trail of a robber." He smiled faintly, stopped Melcher's query with, "I'll tell you all about it when we've unloaded your sled and fixed up the animals." He was struggling into his parka as he said it, added as they made their way outside, "Guess you haven't heard about it yet, have you?"

Melcher grunted, bent lower over the animals to escape the Mountie's searching stare.

"Ain't heard nothin'. I've just come back from a two-day trip over my line."

He found the presence of this policeman strangely disturbing. Blaney was a good man, he knew. He tried to quiet the vague fears that filled him—this routine interrogation would soon be over. The corporal cut into his thoughts. He had noted the pelts, traps and other gear on the cariole.

"Why are you pulling up your traps so early in the season?"

"'Cos I'm fed-up." Melcher purposely made his tone sound dispirited. "There's too many in this game now. I've hauled all my stuff in from my line-shacks an' to-morrer I'm headin' for the outside." He grinned craftily, added: "That is if it's safe to travel, seein' there's been a robbery. Not goin' to shut down on travel, are you?"

A faint smile played about Corporal Blaney's lips as he made answer, filled his arms with gear and led the way into the cabin.

"Of course not, Melcher." He dumped the armful of stuff on the floor, watched Melcher do the same, added as they shed their furs and ranged about the stove: "No, I'm not going to shut down on travel, so you can figure on heading for Edmonton to-morrow." He glanced about the room. "Just take what you'll need on the trail and I'll see that the rest of your gear is shipped out by steamer in the spring."

"Thanks!" Melcher concealed a grin. "Ship it to me, care of the Empire Exchange, Edmonton. That's the regular town hang-out for northerners."

The corporal nodded:

"Now I'll tell you of the robbery." His eyes bored into Melcher's as he briefly recounted what Melcher already knew. Grim exultation filled Melcher as he listened, and as the Mountie ended, he again had to force back a grin and pretend surprise.

"An' you've nothin' to go on, Corp? No trail or clues or nothin'?"

The corporal shook his head.

"No trail and no clues, and although the robber talked a lot, poor old Gardner couldn't hear a word. Not one word."

Melcher wagged his head in mock sorrow.

"That was a dirty trick, eh? Bustin' them ear-phones."

"It was." Blaney's tone was grim, his eyes were on Melcher's face. "Guess

you know, Melcher, that Gardner had his ear-drums ruined when on active service in France. He was smashed up pretty badly, spent almost two years in a military hospital. Then, being stone-deaf, he found it hard to get a job; then they rigged him out with the ear-phone jigger and gave him the postmaster's job up here. He likes it up here and was doing well, but it's a cinch he'll be fired unless we find the money. You know, they'll say that if he hadn't been deaf the robber couldn't have broken in."

The corporal thumped his knee, leaned forward.

"Can you beat it for a low-down trick? The robber bet everything on Gardner's affliction; took advantage of a deaf man. But I'll get him and the money." The Mountie's tone was confident.

"But how, Corp, if you've nothin' to go on?" Melcher moistened his lips.

"Because that money parcel was sizeable and heavy; I don't see how the robber can hide it," was the answer.

Melcher felt the sudden chill of dread subside. Relief flooded him. He grinned:

"But it seems to me the robber didn't overlook nothin'. I'm bettin' he's got that money cached all right."

"The thief did overlook something." Corporal Blaney's eyes were gleaming strangely. His attitude was suddenly tense. Melcher shot an affrighted glance at the policeman. What had he not reckoned with? His heart commenced to thump as he awaited more words. They came.

"Melcher, crooks always make mistakes, and it's our job to discover those mistakes. One of the most common faults amongst crooks is talking too much; they seem unable to keep from boasting; take a vain-glorious pride in their misdeeds."

"You mean——" Melcher again felt at ease—"that after you've caught a suspect you drill things out of him, eh?" He eyed the Mountie narrowly,

again hid a crafty leer. He certainly wasn't going to give himself away by talking, especially after such a warning. What a fool the Mountie was! He was actually explaining to him methods employed by the police.

But still, again that vague worry returned; what was the corporal's idea in just sitting there chatting? He seemed in no hurry to go, to get on with his job of travelling to the next cabin. Neither had he answered his question, in fact he seemed to have forgotten Melcher, was sitting staring over Melcher's shoulder and out of the window.

Again those ghost hairs of dread prickled along Melcher's spine. What the devil was the policeman looking at? As the silence grew the tension became unbearable. Blaney was sitting there in the rigid pose of a man who was listening for something. Listening for what?

Melcher tried to turn his head to follow the Mountie's gaze, but the ghastly terror that now gripped him held him powerless. Beads of cold sweat glistened on his forehead. But what had he to fear? This was just a trick of the corporal's. With a tremendous effort Melcher broke the grip of the vague terror and began to turn his head. And then his heart clawed into his throat and hung there. A voice was calling from outside the shack. Four words, clear and distinct:

"I've found it, Corp."

"Found what?" It was almost a scream as Melcher's taut nerves suddenly snapped. He was on his feet, his frightened cry still echoing in the room. The Mountie was also on his feet. As if by magic a revolver had appeared in his hand. It covered Melcher.

"The money." Blaney's tone was grimly triumphant. He backed away to the door, flung it open. Gardner entered, bearing in his arms the money-laden cariole. He dumped it on the floor and ripped apart the hides, revealing the layers of bank-notes.

Face grey and sweat-flecked, eyes stretched wide in horror, Melcher stared as if fascinated. "But how——" He stared from Gardner to the money and back again, only dimly conscious that the policeman was snapping on the handcuffs. He cringed beneath Gardner's mocking glare.

"Trapped with the goods!" A thin smile twisted the deaf man's lips. "You were so filled with your own cleverness that you had to boast about it. Nothing could go wrong. No trail to follow. Easy to hide the money and take it outside. Slickest hold-up in the north. Easy to rob a stone-deaf man and taunt him with words he could not hear."

"But you must have heard." It was almost a whisper.

"I wish to God I could." Gardner's tone was bitter. "But my ear-drums are gone. Until I get new earphones I won't be able to hear a sound."

"But you must have heard all I said last night." Melcher was now babbling in mortal funk.

"Careful, Melcher!" Corporal Blaney cut in. "Remember that you are now under arrest and anything you say may be used in evidence against you."

Gardner spoke, leaning forward, his eyes mocking.

"Loon Lake! Hide money between cariole sheathing!" He bit off the words. "I got that much and more. Recall how I goaded you to talk? I was watching you mighty close." His lips twisted in a grim smile. "And you shouldn't have let me light that lamp."

"But——" Melcher gulped.

Gardner again leaned forward, eyes and lips grim.

"You schemed pretty well, but you didn't know what I've told no one up here. In hospital they made of me a trained lip-reader. That was one factor you didn't reckon with."

And as the three men later trudged towards the police post, Melcher cursed the factor he had failed to count.





For the Honour of the Force

When Davener Decided to Remain With the Mounties

UP and down, back and forth, within the cramped confines of the log dwelling the two men weaved in their struggles. It was a fight to the death; and both knowing it, they were exerting every ounce of strength they possessed. Excepting for the strained gasping of their tortured lungs, they fought in silence, paying no heed to the splintering of the pieces of rough furniture they crashed into.

In his right hand the older man clutched a knife, and the younger man winced and jerked away suddenly as the steel bit into his shoulder. Grinning, the older man lunged again, but this time his opponent was ready. Grabbing at wrist and waist, using the impetus of the other's rush, he flung him full over his shoulder. As the other man crashed to the floor the younger man whirled to face him; but his antagonist did not attempt to get up.

Slowly, the younger man bent over the inanimate form, gingerly turned it over—then hastily stepped away at what he saw. His opponent had fallen upon his own knife; it had penetrated his heart; he was dead.

For a long time the other man stood

staring in fascinated horror, then strode through the door to the dog-team outside.

Half an hour later, the softly-falling snow, the northland's all-concealing cloak, had covered up the faint trail made by dogs and driver.

"When a native runs all out," Sergeant Morgan, R.C.M.P., informed his command, Constable Davener, "he's either heading for a pal with a stock of moonshine, or he's carrying bad news."

The comment was prompted by the scene the two Mounties were gazing upon, from their post on the eastern shore of Great Slave Lake. Coming toward the post on the dead run, was a dog-team urged by an Indian, who was not trotting, but running with long strides in order to keep up with the animals he had coaxed into belly-skimming speed.

"Gad!" Davener replied; "must be something serious."

Minutes later, the dogs and driver pulled into the compound.

"By cripes, Sergeant," panted the native, "you know me, Joe, eh?"

Morgan nodded.

"By cripes," the runner went on, " 'ell a-bustin' up aroun' Moskeet Island. Man killed, shack all tore loose like."

"Man killed?" Sergeant Morgan stared hard at the Indian. "You saw the shack and the dead man? You mean that squawman, Alamas?"

"Sure, by cripes!" Joe nodded eagerly.

The sergeant suddenly remembered they were standing outdoors, the mercury was almost out of sight, and a few feet away was a well-heated building. Turning he led the way indoors.

"Full particulars, Joe," he ordered.

FULL PARTICULARS

Heavy furs were shed and the three men sat around the stove.

"You know, Moskeet Island, 'bout two 'unerd miles from 'ere lived squawman; feller not much 'count? 'E trap an' fish same as Indian. Live alone wit' 'is woman an' papooses 'cos we not like 'im.

"We like 'is squaw, t'ough, an' once in while we take 'er present. I call four days ago. Found Meeswah cryin' like 'ell; kids t'ey cry too. Alamas dead. Dam' good an' dead. Right away I head for you fellers."

"You know Mosquito Island?" As the native halted the sergeant turned to the constable. "It's at the far end of the lake. Why, you must have visited this man yourself on your patrol a week ago."

"I did," admitted Davener. "First time I'd ever patrolled that district. You usually cover that yourself."

"That's right," agreed Morgan, "and how were things then?"

"Alamas was alone. Squaws and kids were camping near fishing holes."

"M'm!" Morgan nodded slowly. "Now someone's killed him. Why?"

Davener merely shrugged, then offered:

"According to reports he was of no account, anyway?"

"No account be damned!" Sergeant Morgan lurched to his feet, glared at the constable wrathfully. "If a man's killed his past history's nothing to us; our duty is to round up the killer."

"Supposing we fail?" Davener's tone was calm.

"Then we resign and make way for better men," was the contemptuous answer. "I can't fathom you, Davener. You've only been in the Force twelve months, yet you've never taken much interest in the work, excepting patrols. You've always been eager for the trail. Why?"

"Don't let's argue that all over again, old man." The constable got to his feet, placed a hand on Morgan's shoulder. "I had a reason for joining up, and, even if I haven't got the welfare of the Service at heart the way you have, I've never yet fallen down on a job, have I?"

"No, you're a good man," admitted Morgan, "but your calmness is damned irritating at times. Here we've apparently got a murder case on our hands, and you just say, 'supposing we fail?' We're not *going* to fail. We're expected to do our jobs." He turned to the Indian. "Be ready to guide me back to-morrow, Joe." The native grunted. Assisted by the constable, Morgan commenced preparations for an early departure.

Silently, Sergeant Morgan, watched curiously by Meeswah, the dead man's squaw, and her sloe-eyed children, stared at the scene of chaos that was the interior of Alamas's cabin. Joe, the native, was attending to the dogs. Morgan turned to the woman.

"You have touched nothing?"

"No." She shrank back. "Me wait for Mounties to come lik' Joe tell me. Live in fish tent w'ile we wait."

"You heard nothing? Saw nothing?"

"No. Come back wit' fish, fin' my

man dead." She ended with a wail of grief.

"M'm!" Morgan again looked around the one room. "Must have been a terrific fight," he muttered, and advanced toward the body. No need to look very close; the haft of a knife protruding from the dead man's breast told the whole story. Carefully, the sergeant extracted the weapon and examined it. It was an ordinary hunting-knife of popular make. Something clutched in one dead hand caught his eye. He pried the fingers loose and secured a piece of grey flannel. No doubt part of the killer's shirt.

Not much of a clue. Grey flannel shirts were common among both natives and white men. But as he examined the piece of cloth more closely, Morgan felt a chill creep over him. It looked like part of an issue shirt—the kind worn by members of the Mounted! And Davener had recently returned from a patrol of this district; had admitted calling upon Alamas.

For a moment Morgan's imagination ran wild, then he sternly checked it. The idea was preposterous. Yet, there certainly was something about the constable he could not fathom. What was the reason for the man's apparent lack of interest in routine work? Why did he always behave like a man with some hidden purpose in view? He had practically admitted, on several occasions, that he was using his enlistment as a means to an end. What was that end?

That chill feeling remained. For, after a man has put in twenty years with the Force, as Morgan had done, he is steel core to the core. And if the man under him had committed this crime the disgrace would reflect upon himself.

Then Morgan suddenly realised that he was getting ahead of himself. The piece of shirting might mean anything. After all, members of the Mounted often gave away old shirts to natives.

Other white men often wore grey flannel shirts of issue quality.

The sergeant stowed the piece of cloth away in a pocket and pulled himself together.

THE PHOTOGRAPH



Again he bent over the corpse, rifling every pocket, finding nothing except a little money and the usual oddments a man loads his pockets with. He turned then to a small trunk. The few garments it contained he flung to one side. At the very bottom he found a metal cash-box. This he opened.

A few bundles of letters, one or two snapshots, then, at the very bottom, a cabinet photograph; a portrait of a man and a girl. The man was the dead one, although several years younger, and dressed in city clothes. The girl's face seemed somewhat familiar. Morgan glanced at the photographer's name on the bottom. "Whiston. Edmonton. 1928." So the man had been in Edmonton five years before!

Somehow, Morgan felt, the photograph was a clue. Yet, he glanced at the squaw and her children hovering, fearfully, outside the door. One of the children was at least seven years of age. Getting to his feet he approached the woman, the picture in his hand.

"How long you married to him?" He indicated the dead body.

"Ten, mebbe 'leven years," she replied. "'E leave me once t'ough for mebbe two winters; t'en 'e come back." Morgan nodded, understandingly; Alamas had heeded the call of the outside and his own kind, but the call of the North had proved the stronger; he had come back.

But why the photograph? Morgan glanced at it again. Then it struck him like a blow between the eyes. No wonder the girl's face seemed familiar. Her face was a feminine copy of Davener's.

Morgan saw it in a flash.

The dead man had gone outside. By some strange quirk of fate he had won the regard of Davener's sister. Had probably deserted her, after committing bigamy. Davener had enlisted in order to hunt the man in the far north. A few days ago he had met him. The result——? Morgan glanced at the dead man.

And then came surprising interruption as Joe came running toward the cabin, waving a piece of paper.

"I fin' 'im among our t'ings," he gasped.

Morgan grasped the paper, unfolded it and read:

Don't waste your time investigating Alamas's death. It was a man-to-man fight and I won. Been trailing him for a long time. Have not left a clue for you to follow.

Morgan read the note aloud to the wondering native.

"By cripes!" was Joe's comment. "'E dam' good dog-man to sneak up lik' t'at without wake us, eh?"

Morgan nodded; considering, however, that snow which had been falling steadily for over a week offered a good cloak.

Then another startling fact forced itself upon him. The note was written on a typewriter! Every post possessed a machine, but his own post was the nearest. And the girl's

pictured resemblance to Davener?

As he assisted the native in loading the body on to a cariole, Morgan's mind was distraught. If he cleared up the case it looked like bringing disgrace on the Force. If he didn't, then it meant resigning because he had failed.

Gruffly, he ordered the woman to hitch her own dogs and follow. An hour later the three teams were wending their way on their return journey. As he trudged along, Morgan saw the end.

The dead man buried at the post. The woman returned to her tribe. Himself turned out on the world within a few years of his pension, with knowledge of nothing but mounted police work. And all because Davener had taken the law into his own hands. What other solution was there?

On the seventh night, Morgan made camp within an easy day's journey of his post. His nerves were in rags, due to worry and the woman's almost continual wailing after the fashion of her kind. Wearily Morgan crawled into his sleeping-bag.

Awakening first in the morning, he sat up; then he rubbed his eyes and stared again, doubting what he saw. Pinned to his sleeping-bag was a note. With freezing fingers he unfolded it and read:

Shouldn't speak your thoughts aloud; there might be listeners. There was one. Constable Davener did not kill Alamas. The north is a big country. You do not know every resident in your district. One you will never meet. This message is final.

Typewritten again! Tracks! With a bound Morgan was out of his bag, had huddled into his furs, had awakened the Indian. Through the dim half-light they searched, their eyes blinded with the swirling snow. Joe offered the soundest solution.

"'E follow us, t'en 'e back track."

Morgan nodded. Should he act on

that and retrace his own steps or continue to the post? The notes could easily have been written and placed by Davener; and an hour's snow will obliterate the trail of one man and team. He would continue to the post. An hour later they were again on their way.

I DIDN'T KILL HIM

As Morgan rushed into the compound, Davener opened the door and came forward to meet him. His eyes were calm, questioning. Morgan indicated the three teams.

"Brought the body and family back," he explained. Davener merely nodded, then bent to the task of helping unload and stow away the frozen corpse in an out-building. Morgan worked with him, eyeing him curiously the whole time.

Followed food for trail-bitten animals and humans. Another hour and the natives were sleeping soundly in an inner room. Then, and only then, when he and Davener were alone, did Morgan explode.

"Ever seen any of these before?" He fixed his eyes on the constable, watching for the slightest change of expression, as he laid upon the table the two notes, the piece of shirting, the photograph, and the knife he had extracted from the dead man's breast.

Davener handled them, examined them carefully, then replied:

"No."

"Nothing surprising about them although you've never seen them before?" with a supreme effort Morgan kept his voice even. He felt almost admiration for Davener's self-control.

"The notes are unusual," was the answer, "but the piece of shirting indicates nothing to me." He drew a deep breath, ended: "And the photograph is of my sister and the dead man."

"Davener!" Morgan rapped it out. "Quit evading. Why did you kill Alamas?"

"I didn't kill him."

Only the constable's quickened breathing showed that he was disturbed. Morgan felt like shaking him. Accused of killing another, yet he remained quite calm. He tried again.

"Davener, you visited this man about the time he was killed. In his hand I found that piece of shirting that looks like part of an issue shirt. In his trunk a picture of your sister. Tell me everything and, if as I think, you had a damned good reason for doing it—it was a fight, not murder, anyway—I'll report that I failed and we'll both resign." Morgan stopped, his voice a-tremble. It had cost him a lot to say that. Resign! Failed!

Davener regarded him quietly, then:

"I reported that Alamas was alone when I called. He was. I did not kill him for the simple reason that he was dead when I called!"

"Then why didn't you report? Why didn't you hunt for clues? Why—Oh, damn!" Morgan slumped into a chair, his face a mask of bewilderment.

Suddenly he sat up, struck by a sudden thought.

"You said Alamas himself told you his squaw and kids were on a fishing trip."

"I slipped up there," admitted Davener. "Knew they were, though, because I sighted them camped out on the ice."

"Did you conceal or remove any clues?"

"No." The constable's eyes were level.

"Then——" Morgan jerked to his feet, went on, trying to speak calmly. "Look here, Davener, I've put my cards on the table, told you the sacrifice I'm willing to make. Play the game with me."

He stopped at that as he saw that the constable was not listening; his eyes were staring out of a window; his attitude was tense. Morgan also stared. Approaching the post was a team.

In two strides the sergeant had reached the door, Davener at his heels. "Good boy," the constable breathed, his calm gone. Morgan glanced at him, then hastened to assist the newcomer to unhitch. The task ended, the new arrival hastened to where Davener still stood. The two men clasped hands.

MY BROTHER

Davener introduced the newcomer to the bewildered sergeant.

"Morgan, this is my brother, Frank." With that he led the way back into the room and the three men seated themselves. Davener glanced at his brother, then began.

"It's a big relief to me, Sergeant, to be able to explain.

"Five years ago William Alamas and my sister were married at Edmonton. It was a young girl's infatuation for a man from the far north. Inside a year he left her. None of us minded much until we heard it whispered that he had a native wife.

"Then my sister met a young chap she really loved. She told him everything. He still wanted her. Then came the stumbling-block. If Alamas wasn't legally married to his native wife then he was to my sister. That meant she would need a proper divorce before she could re-marry.

"The upshot was, lacking the cash to buy outfit, dogs, grub and all that for a lengthy tour of the north, my brother took a job with a trading company, I enlisted in the Mounted; our sole object to find Alamas.

"On my last patrol I ran into my brother. He was in bad shape; mentally and physically. Told me he had met, fought, and killed Alamas.

"I advised him to stay hidden until spring, then he could get out over the mountains. I knew he'd never get past our posts on the ice-trail, once news of the killing got abroad."

"But the notes?" Morgan stared

from one to the other.

"Frank's idea. He carries a portable for making reports. Watching you, he learned you suspected me. Tried to tell you you were wrong."

"What started the fight?"

"Frank pulled up outside the cabin, not knowing whose it was. Alamas jumped him the moment he entered. Frank fought back. No time to run for a policeman up here." He smiled grimly.

"But," expostulated Morgan, "the note I got this morning said 'final.'"

"He wrote that last night. When I met him this morning he had already planted it."

"This morning?"

"Yes. After I got over the first shock I thought the whole thing over quietly. I met Frank this morning and told him the right thing to do was to own up and to stand trial. I had to run all out to get back before you. Being hurt, Frank couldn't stand the pace, so he followed. You are a witness to the knife wound in his shoulder. What verdict will a jury bring in?"

"Justifiable homicide." Morgan felt a great wave of relief surging over him. "But why didn't you let our fellows locate Alamas for you?"

"Family pride," was the quiet reply. "We didn't want others to know of my sister's youthful folly. Frank's trial, held up here in the spring, can be kept from the papers."

"Something else, though, made you urge your brother to stand trial?" The sergeant was insistent; was eager for the words that came.

"Yes, Sergeant; I didn't want an unsolved crime in our district to be a mark against us, because I like serving in the Mounted and intend to stick." The constable was smiling proudly. "So, with me as with you, before everything else comes the honour of the Force."

Suddenly erect, Sergeant Morgan held out a hand, equally erect, Constable Davener gripped it.



A Happy Christmas

The Airtight Plot And What Blew It Open

TOM GARDNER, standing just outside his cabin, was staring expectantly along the frozen reaches of the Liard River. It was the twenty-fourth of the month, the day Henri should arrive with the mail. The temperature was boreal, but Henri never failed to arrive on time, regardless of the weather. Tiny black specks appeared far down the ice, and Gardner gave a grunt of satisfaction. Good old Henri, right on schedule.

The mail-carrying scheme was a private arrangement by which the isolated trappers in that section of Canada's Far North paid the postmaster-storekeeper at Lac Charron, a small settlement several days' journey away, to forward their mail and small supplies once a month.

The carrier on the unofficial mail circuit made Gardner's his last point of call on his way back.

Gardner recognised Henri's dogs; no mistaking huge, black Mosqui, in the lead. He hurried into the cabin and commenced to prepare a meal. Henri would be famished, for it was nearly noon, and no doubt he had been bucking the cold since before daybreak.

As he busied himself about the cabin

Gardner read again the list he had prepared of goods to be brought out on Henri's next trip. Matches and cartridges came first. He was very short of both.

Letters! Gardner smiled as he glanced at the pile he had placed upon the table ready for the dog-runner. His was a lonely life, and he eased his solitude somewhat by writing often to his wife and boy, living "outside" because his son had to attend school.

The panting of dogs caused him to turn from the stove to the door. It flung open and a huge, fur-clad figure crowded inside. Gardner halted the greeting on his lips—the man was not Henri.

The newcomer grinned.

"Nope, I ain't the native." He tossed a bundle of letters, parcels and periodicals on the table. "He got celebrating Christmas too soon down at the settlement, so the Mounted took him in charge. I wasn't busy, so I offered to run the route."

"Decent of you." Gardner nodded his thanks.

"Aw, that's all right." The runner was shedding heavy furs. "Used to trap

a bit myself and know what mails mean. Give me a feed, your mail and list and I'll be on my way. Ruskin's my name," he finished.

"Thanks." Gardner handed Ruskin letters and list. "Don't forget to turn 'em in, I'm pretty shy of some things." He turned back to the stove.

As they ate, Gardner surreptitiously studied Ruskin. He saw a huge bulk of a man with thin lips and eyes set too closely together. Hardly the kind of man to inspire trust, though he had bucked a long trail in the depth of winter so that a few trappers would not be disappointed.

Gardner noted the man wolfed his food greedily. There was something about him Gardner did not like; but he tried to shake off the feeling as being unfair to Ruskin, as, the meal ended, both men commenced to load pipes.

"How did it happen you were available?" he asked.

"Well, I was trapping in the Nahanni country. Caribou herd gave us a miss in that district and came through here. Consequence, you fellers got the fur that always follows the deer. I pulls out, winds up at Lac Charron. I gets to drinking, and meets up with Henri. With a few drinks in 'im he talks."

"Most men do," was Gardner's terse comment, his mind puzzled by Ruskin's words.

"Sure," Ruskin nodded. "I pours a few more shots into 'im"—he grinned as he saw Gardner's start—"and he gets real loquacious. He tells me all about his mail route, what a good job he has, and how well you fellers have made out this season. And he said that you have made more in the last eighteen months, washing gold in summer and trapping in winter, than any feller in this district. Is that right?"

"Well——" Then Gardner caught himself. What right had this man to question him? "Damn it, Ruskin, I fail to see what it has to do with you. Neither do I want to tolerate your

company, now you have admitted giving liquor to a native. You know how Indians go berserk after a few drinks."

A tense pause followed, both men eyeing one another intently. Ruskin's eyes were pinpoints of greed. He broke the silence with a coarse chuckle, fumbled in a pocket for a match, and apparently failed to find one.

"Aw, look here, Gardner"—his tone was wheedling—"we're getting all het up about nothing. I was interested 'cos I had such rotten luck myself. How you fixed for matches?" He was still fumbling in his pockets. Gardner got to his feet; perhaps he had been too touchy.

"All I have, Ruskin." He reached a box from a shelf. "Don't forget to turn in my order; you can see I'm pretty short."

"Sure that's all you've got?" Ruskin took a few. "None cached no place?"

"No," Gardner assured him. "I'm also short of ammunition." He replaced the box of matches on a shelf. Ruskin relit his pipe, eyeing him through a cloud of smoke.

"So you're short of cartridges, too." Ruskin spoke carelessly. "What weapons you got? All I have is this." He produced a heavy automatic pistol. "If the ammunition will fit your gun I'll leave you some."

"I only have a 30-30 rifle," Gardner replied. "Even we trappers aren't allowed to carry revolvers without a special licence."

"That's right," Ruskin agreed. "I was allowed this 'cos of running the mail." He cursed. "Blast 'em, the Mounted have this country all tied up with fool regulations."

"Good thing for us, isn't it?" Gardner voiced his surprise. "It gives us protection."

"I wonder." Ruskin was still playing with the automatic. "It'd be hard for a feller to get away with rough stuff, but he could pull off a robbery up here easy if he liked."

Gardner snorted. "He'd never get away with it."

"No?" Ruskin's tone had suddenly changed; he was leering openly. Gardner shrank back as he saw the automatic was pointed straight at him.

"HANDS UP!"

"What the devil?" Gardner stared from the pistol to Ruskin's face. "You fool. Thinking of shooting me and robbing me?"

"I'll shoot if you don't put your hands up." Ruskin was on his feet, his face hard. Gardner raised his hands. In obedience to further orders he turned around and put his hands behind him. He was trussed hand and foot before his surprised brain again commenced to function. Ruskin began to ransack the cabin. For a few minutes Gardner watched him.

"You're a fool, Ruskin," he said at last. "Other men have tried to get away with robbery up here. They're in jail now, or dead."

Ruskin ignored him. He had found what he sought, the gold. He did not take it all, but stooped a good three-quarters of it into a buckskin pouch. Then he hurried outside to Gardner's fur cache. When he returned, in his arms he held many of the finer hides.

Speedily, he lashed gold and pelts into a compact bundle worth several thousand dollars. Once more he commenced a systematic search of the shack. As he worked he talked, revealing the plan he had been months perfecting. As he listened, Gardner's heart sank lower and lower. He strained furiously at his bonds.

"You'll notice I'm playing safe," Ruskin sneered. "I'm pulling this off so neat that only you and me'll ever know it was pulled off. And you won't talk. You won't be able to foller me for a month, 'cos you won't have no visitors till Henri gets here next month. Mid-season now; all the fellers round

here are too busy getting pelts to go visiting."

He broke off and bent over his victim and went through his every pocket. His search finished he straightened up, continued:

"Air-tight. Give the Mounties a corpse and a trail to foller and they gets their man. But if they don't know a crime's been committed, what they to go on?"

"What's to prevent me from heading into Lac Charron?" Gardner gritted out the query. "You've got to take the ice-trail with a team; I can travel light and go overland and be there twenty-four hours ahead of you." Then an awful thought took hold of Gardner, his voice was almost a whisper as he asked: "You're not going to leave me tied to freeze, are you?"

"No," Ruskin leered. "I ain't leaving you tied, and I ain't taking your grub. Yet you won't be able to foller me until someone calls; and by then I'll be outside. You can't lay a charge then 'cos it'll only be one man's word against another's; and, besides the police'll find some gold and pelts here and they just won't believe you. They'll naturally think that if you'd been held up, the crook would have taken everything. I'm telling you," he boasted, "this is airtight."

Gardner thought furiously. If he could get into the settlement ahead of Ruskin, then a search of the man's load would be sufficient proof. What was to prevent him taking the overland trail? He stared at the sardonic features leering down at him.

"Can you dope out how I'm going to tie you here?" Ruskin seemed to be enjoying himself. "How long'll it take me to hit the settlement? Four nights and three days," he answered the question himself. "It'll take you three nights and two days, providing you travels hard across country, over the hills. If you could leave here to-morrow morning you could just about beat me into the Mounted. But

you won't be able to move till someone comes along."

Gardner stared at the man. Was he insane? Ruskin seemed to read his thoughts.

"Nope, I ain't bugs. But you're pretty tough and you know this country. It's about forty-five below right now. Could you go two days and three nights and travel nigh a hundred and fifty miles without food, water or fire?"

Gardner shook his head.

"You could risk it, mind you," Ruskin sneered further, "but what a pretty wreck you'd be time the old doc at the settlement got through sawing off frozen toes and fingers. Wouldn't be worth the risk, would it?"

Again Gardner shook his head. He was convinced now that Ruskin was mad. All he now wished was to get rid of him. Yet Ruskin had spoken the simple truth. It would be suicidal to buck a mid-winter trail without food, or means of cooking food and making fire. But he, Gardner, had those means.

Ruskin suddenly stooped and cut the lashings from Gardner's feet. "I'm leaving you the knife so's you can get your hands free, and I'll leave your mail. Notice on two of the parcels it says 'A Happy Christmas.' That's to-morrow, eh?"

NO MATCHES



"Yes, damn you." Gardner was on his feet, stretching his cramped legs.

Ruskin grinned. Picked up the bundle of furs and gold. "Well, I'll be well on my way afore you get your

hands free. I'm also wishing you a happy Christmas."

The door slammed behind him.

Even as the door slammed, Gardner commenced to work furiously to free his hands. It took him minutes. He flung outside in time to see Ruskin disappearing into the distance. Gritting his teeth he re-entered his shack, commenced to throw together a pack-sack of food for the trail. Bacon, tea, flour and sugar. Blankets and——

Like a thunderbolt the diabolical fiendishness of Ruskin's plan struck Gardner. Neither in his clothing nor in the cabin was there one single match!

The realisation crumpled him, a mortified wreck, upon a chair. Food a man can go without for a limited period, but without water or sleep he is useless. Handfuls of snow merely increase thirst. Without fire, in the Far North, a man cannot procure water.

Gardner jerked to his feet. He recalled words Ruskin had sneered:

"It's forty-five below. Could you go three nights and two days without water, food or fire?"

Not one match! In a veritable frenzy Gardner shook out blankets and clothing. He could make fire with rifle-cartridges—no, Ruskin, had taken them.

Gardner tried to think of other ways of making fire. He could not. Why, even the natives nowadays depended upon matches.

He'd risk it. In a gust of anger he flung himself upon the pack he had begun. Then he began to think it over. At many posts he had seen victims of the terrific cold. What was money compared with being crippled for life? Here, at least, he was sheltered. He could keep the fire going in the stove—would have to, or freeze.

Again he sank into a chair. He had hoped this would be his last Christmas spent away from his wife and son; he had cleaned up enough to go into busi-

ness in town. Now—he cursed Ruskin long and bitterly.

A shiver ran through him. The fire! It was getting low. In panic he piled on more wood. He was tied to his cabin as long as the cold weather lasted, or until someone called, as firmly as if held by steel thongs. Almost idly he picked up the mail Ruskin had brought him. Dusk having fallen he lighted a lamp. He became engrossed in the letters. A passage in one caused him to smile. It was from his wife.

"Of course, dear, you will open my parcel as soon as received, but on no account are you to open Ronald's before Christmas Day. I do not know myself what it is, but for days he has been almost bursting with a secret."

Gardner opened the large parcel from his wife. His thoughts were tender as he fingered the articles enclosed. His eyes suddenly hardened; if only his wife had enclosed one small box of matches! But the idea was ridiculous. It was merely because small matches loomed so necessary in his distraught mind that the thought had occurred.

He picked up the small parcel from his boy. It was plastered with "Do not open until Christmas" stickers. He would keep faith with the youngster and not open the parcel until the morrow. He placed the package upon a shelf.

"A Happy Christmas." The phrase burned into his brain as he cooked and ate his lonely supper. And what Ruskin has said was true; Gardner could not even lay a charge against him, for his story would be ridiculed by the hard-bitten members of the Mounted.

In a frenzy of impotent rage he jerked to his feet and again flung himself outside. The cold struck him a physical blow. It would be madness to attempt to follow Ruskin without means of making fire. The man had enlisted the aid of the Far North's most fatal weapon: cold.

HENRI'S CHARGE

"I wish," said Corporal Black, of the Lac Charron detachment of the Mounted, as he thumped his arms and stamped his feet vigorously, "our man would hurry up."

His companion, Constable Vigar, likewise doing an anti-cold dance, grinned.

"Me too." He suddenly became serious. "But we mustn't let him get by this post. But I don't believe he'll try to. He's out to pull off the good-fellow, friend-of-the-Mounted stunt. Maybe that's the man."

Far down the river appeared dark blotches on the virgin whiteness.

Minutes later a dog-team scrambled up from the ice to where the Mounties stood.

"Howdy, fellers!" Ruskin halted his team in a cloud of steam. He busied himself with his load and disappeared into the post once with a small sack. The Mounties stood motionless. Ruskin emerged from the building.

"Here's the gun you allowed me, Corp." He extended the automatic and extra magazines. "Never used it. Didn't have to shoot a thing. Now, guess I'm free to go to my shack, eh?"

Corporal Black seemed to have forgotten the cold.

"Not just yet, Ruskin," he said. "We'd like you to come along to the barracks." He was holding the pistol, apparently indifferently.

"You see," he added, as the three men trudged towards the buildings, "Henri claims that you supplied him with the whisky and caused all his troubles."

Ruskin turned a startled face toward the officer, growled as they halted at the post.

"Show me the Indian. Wouldn't take a native's word against that of a white man, would you, Corp?"

"Of course not." The Corporal spoke absently as the three men

gathered about the stove, then: "So you didn't use this pistol?"

"Nope." Ruskin was warming himself.

"You delivered all the mail?"

"Sure, and glad I did. One man named Gardner was tickled pink to get presents from his wife and boy. I wished him a happy Christmas."

The corporal regarded him steadily, then commenced to fill his pipe.

"Have you a match?" he asked Ruskin.

"Lots," grinned Ruskin, handing over a few. "I know this country and always carry plenty of matches."

"I see." The corporal puffed quietly, then addressed the constable. "Go and attend to the dogs and bring in this man's bedding."

Ruskin commenced to protest. The corporal silenced him, and soon the constable staggered in with a roll of bedding and a grub-box. With a grunt he dropped them on the floor.

"To return to the charge against you," the corporal went on as the constable straightened up. "We wouldn't dream of taking a native's unsubstantiated word against that of one of our own kind, but a man named Gardner says that you boasted to him that you had given Henri liquor."

"Gardner?" Ruskin stared from one Mountie to the other.

"Yes." The corporal nodded. "And Gardner also said that you had taken all his matches and rifle cartridges. He also claims you robbed him of gold and pelts, so we must search your bedroll."

"W-what?" It was a frightened gasp. "But Gardner's at his cabin."

"No." The corporal turned and beckoned. Ruskin shrank back as Gardner appeared from another room.

Ruskin stared as if unable to believe his eyes. "How—how'd you get here without matches?" The words seemed forced from him.

The corporal warned:

"Careful, Ruskin, three of us heard you say that."

"Let's end it!" Gardner spoke, his eyes glaring. "You know, Ruskin, my stuff is in your bedroll. You're trapped with the goods."

"But how—without matches?" Ruskin gulped, licked his lips.

"I took a long chance on the present my boy sent me for Christmas," came Gardner's response. There came a faint click, a flame appeared in the trapper's hand. "My boy sent me a pocket-lighter and a can of fuel," Gardner explained grimly, "with sincere wishes for 'A Happy Christmas.'"





The Tact of Sergeant Keen

The Appearance of a Girl at the Far North Post

IN the living-room of the R.C.M.P. post at Carcajou Point, Sergeant Keen was writing his monthly report. Softly uttered swear words made it apparent that he was not enjoying the task. Glancing up, he encountered the smiling features of Corporal Dineen, who was seated as close to the glowing stove as he dared.

"Grin, you blighter!" Sergeant Keen threw down his pen and commenced to fill his pipe. "I wish I'd sent you, instead of Exham, out on patrol. He's a good head and usually makes these blessed things out for me."

Corporal Dineen continued to grin. A brilliant idea struck the sergeant.

"Seeing Exham's away, I'll wrestle you to see who makes 'em out this month."

The challenge was promptly accepted. As eagerly as a couple of schoolboys the two Mounties engaged in a friendly tussle.

Straining and gasping they reeled about the room; then, with a tremendous heave that made his muscles crack, the sergeant up-ended the corporal. In that position, hugging his comrade's legs to his chest, he froze, as the door was suddenly opened and a frightened cry reached his ears.

"Good Lord!" Releasing the hapless corporal and letting him tumble to the floor in a heap, the sergeant stared, for the lamplight revealed that the face of the fur-clad figure framed in the doorway was that of a girl.

"Please don't fight any more." Timidly, the girl advanced into the room. "I need your help. Please."

"Good Lord!" Again the exclamation came of its own accord. Then Sergeant Keen pulled himself together. "We were not fighting," he explained. "Just having a little exercise. Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Team outside?"

"Yes."

"Attend to the young lady's dogs." Swiftly the corporal scrambled to his feet and hastened outside to obey the order. Closing the door, the sergeant turned again to the girl, helped her to shed her heavy furs, placed a chair for her close to the stove, and sat down himself, facing her.

He studied her in silence for a few moments as she sat quietly allowing the heat from the stove to imbue new life into her numbed hands and feet. Looking up and catching his interested gaze, she spoke.

"Is a girl travelling alone such a novelty up here?"

"Yes," the sergeant admitted. "It is rarely that the few white women in the Far North travel far in winter-time. They never travel alone." He continued to regard her, waiting.

"My name is Marion Parker," she volunteered. "I got off the train at Waterways three weeks ago. There I hired a native and two dog-teams to bring me up here. One to carry our things and the other one I rode behind."

"Who was the native?"

"Tom Two-feathers he called himself."

"A good man," the sergeant admitted. "Where is he now?"

"He was a good man," the girl agreed, "until last night. He slipped through a crust of rotten ice yesterday afternoon and got wet to the waist. We made camp at once and got a big fire going. Then, anxious that he should not catch cold, I let him know that I had a bottle of brandy among my things and advised him to have a drink."

She shuddered as if at some unpleasant memory, then continued:

"I made a mistake in letting him know about the brandy. He took several drinks and changed from a good servant into a beast. I fought him with a dog-whip, and finally had to produce my revolver. Then I gave him some money, told him to take one of the teams and some necessary food and blankets, and ordered him to go back. I had learned from him that this post was near. And here I am."

"I'LL TELL YOU IN THE MORNING"

She leaned back and closed her eyes. Warm admiration filled the sergeant. Evidently city-bred, for some reason she had headed out into the white wastes in the dead of winter, and, when her helper had reverted to type, had bravely mushed on by herself, driving five half-tamed huskies.

The entrance of the corporal stirred the sergeant into action. A few whispered words and, while the corporal busied himself preparing a meal, Sergeant Keen strode into his bedroom and commenced making it presentable enough to offer comfortable quarters for the girl.

But what was she doing six hundred miles north of the nearest railroad? The thought puzzled him as he worked. He finished his job and, still puzzled, went back to the living-room. The girl had fallen asleep in her chair. The Mountie looked at her with a tolerant gaze. Young, healthy, strong, she cer-

tainly was, but, just the same, she had no business in the Far North. Or had she? Burning with curiosity though he was, the sergeant resolved to wait until morning before interrogating her.

The corporal whispered that the meal was ready. Gently the sergeant roused the girl.

With a start she sat up and gazed about her, then asked:

"I'm tired and very hungry. You won't ask me any more questions to-night, will you? In the morning I'll tell you everything."

The sergeant nodded and smiled, and drew her chair up to the table. The three ate almost in silence. Half an hour later the visitor was sleeping soundly in the sergeant's room, whilst he and the corporal discussed the matter in lowered voices as they washed dishes in the kitchen.

An hour later the corporal was snoring lustily in his own bunk, whilst Sergeant Keen, lying in the bunk of the third member of the post's personnel, Constable Exham, let his mind drift back over the happenings of the past four years. He thought of Exham plugging along behind his dogs out there in the snow and frost. Why he thought of the constable he did not know, as the girl's arrival dominated most of his reflections. Well, maybe the morning would see his curiosity satisfied. Turning over, the sergeant commenced an unmusical counterpoint to the corporal's snores.

Breakfast was ended, the corporal was outside, and the girl and the sergeant sat facing one another across the stove.

"I am from Seattle," she said. "I was born there. My father was in the lumber business and made quite a lot of money. We—my father and mother, and only brother—were very happy together until about six years ago, when my brother graduated from college. Then he got mixed up with a wild crowd.

"My father cut off his allowance, but

Mother helped him with money until all her own had been squandered. Then there was a quarrel and my brother disappeared. Months later I met him on the street. He was in a terrible condition. He gabbled out a story that he had joined a gang of rum-runners. The night before his boat had been pursued by a coastguard cutter. Shots had been exchanged and a government official killed. He told me that, although he had not fired a shot, he was afraid he might be framed.

"He asked me to lend him enough money to get away. I gave him all I had. He promised to go to Canada. That was the last any of us heard from him."

"M'm!" The sergeant nodded. "Why do you seek him now—are you very fond of him?"

"No, Sergeant, I am not; but since he disappeared, Father and Mother have died. My mother died barely three months ago." Her eyes clouded.

Keen felt a tightening at his throat, asked:

"Why are you now looking for him?"

"For three reasons. On her deathbed I promised Mother I would try and find Sydney and help him. Secondly, I am engaged to be married, and do not want any family skeletons appearing later on. Thirdly, after my parents died there was very little money left, but before it can be distributed equally between my brother and myself, either his signature must be obtained or proof of his death."

"M'm!" The Mountie regarded the girl closely. She reminded him of someone; whom, he could not decide. He spoke:

"Then, Miss Parker, what I understand is this. You have lost your parents, your brother means very little to you, but, before you get married you wish all family troubles to be cleared up."

"Yes. Our lawyers advertised without result. I decided to try and find my brother. I traced him as far as the

end of the railroad. Then I started up here. At each of your posts I made inquiries, but they knew nothing. If you can provide me with another guide, I am prepared to search further."

"The money will be all yours if you cannot trace your brother?"

"Yes. But it is not altogether the money." The girl leaned forward. "My brother had a weakness for drink and gambling. I want to know if he is now living decently."

"I see." The sergeant nodded. "You know, Miss Parker, it takes all kinds to make a world. Some men can't stand the gaff of life up here. Others can't withstand the temptations of a big city. If you knew your brother was dead, you'd feel better about it than knowing that he was living a depraved life in some large town, eh?"

THE GESTURE

"Oh yes." The girl leaned forward eagerly and raised a hand to her forehead. And that gesture brought knowledge to Sergeant Keen. He had witnessed it a hundred times.

"How old are you, Miss Parker?"

"Nineteen. My brother is ten years older. That is why I know him so slightly. He was at college when I was a child."

Keen did some rapid thinking, said:

"It is fortunate for you, Miss Parker, that you called here." The girl raised her eyebrows. Keen went on. "I have almost positive proof that your brother is dead. The north is a hard country; that is, a man either makes or breaks. About four years ago, when I took over here, natives reported finding a body when the snow went. I investigated. The wolves had got in their work and there was not much left. No papers or other means of identification. We buried the remains at this post. Have you a photograph of your brother?"

"No," was the reply. "But Sydney was tall and rather thin."

"The remains we buried were those of a tall man," replied the sergeant.

"Oh!" The girl shuddered. "I will not pretend grief, Sergeant, as I hardly knew my brother, but can you give me proof that will satisfy my lawyers?"

"A photograph of the grave and a written statement of myself, witnessed by Corporal Dineen, will be sufficient proof." Going to the door, Keen called Dineen. A few minutes later and the girl had the proof. Sergeant Keen spoke again:

"To-morrow morning, Miss Parker, Corporal Dineen will take you to our next post south. From there on to railroad our fellows will provide escort. I hope your married life will be very happy."

He held out his hand. Her eyes swimming with tears, the girl grasped it.

Two days later Keen greeted Constable Exham as he rushed into the compound.

They sat down to a meal and the sergeant surreptitiously studied Exham. His suspicions were confirmed. But he waited until they both were puffing on their pipes.

"Tough patrol? Anything happen?"

"Hard going, yes," admitted the constable. "But nothing to report. I'm dog-tired, though." He raised a hand to his forehead. The gesture did not escape the sergeant.

"Don't want to pry into your private affairs, Exham, but we've had a visitor. A girl who gave her name as Parker."

He saw the constable's start, went on:

"It appears her father and mother died recently. She is to marry a chap in Seattle. Before doing so she wanted to trace her brother. Before starting on her new life she wished to make sure

that no skeleton would fall out of a cupboard and spoil things a bit."

The sergeant paused, noting that the constable was hanging on every word. He went on:

"About a year ago, Exham, you got chewed up by a team. I nursed you. You raved a bit in delirium. I am the only one who heard what you said. But to come back to the girl. Apparently her brother was a bit of a scapegrace. But out in the wilds here he is probably living a useful life and a man's life. A small inheritance might spoil all that, take him to town and start him downwards.

"Anyway, I showed the girl the grave of that chap I brought in four years ago. You helped me bury him. The girl is now on her way outside, firmly convinced that the man she knew as her brother is dead. Think I did right?"

The constable was on his feet, pacing the floor.

"Yes, Keen, I do. Some day"—his tone became wistful—"I hope to visit my—" He broke off and stared at the sergeant. "You've read Tennyson's works, eh?" The sergeant nodded. "Galahad, wasn't it," the constable went on, "who said, 'If I lose myself, I save myself'?" He continued to stare at his superior officer, ended:

"Sergeant, I think that you showed good judgment and remarkable tact."

"Thanks!" The sergeant was on his feet and an intense glow was in his eyes. "The Mounted needs good men like yourself. Besides"—his eyes strayed to the paper-strewn desk—"had I let you go, who'd have made out my monthly report for me?"

With an understanding smile Constable Exham held out his hand. With warm, relieved feelings, Sergeant Keen grasped it.



Thirst

The Killer Caught by Careless Drinking

CORPORAL GARRICK felt the bullet smash its way into the body of his mount a split second before the vicious roar of a gun assailed his ears. As the horse screamed, stumbled, crashed heavily to the ground, the Mountie wrenched his feet clear of the stirrups. He was too late; the surprise was complete. The trooper was whirled through the air to smash heavily on the sun-tortured grass. The impact stunned him.

From the shelter of a clump of willows, eyes, alight with a cold flame, glared at the scene. Gun in hand, the man who had fired the shot stealthily approached.

Consciousness slowly returned to the policeman, his shocked brain again began to function. Cautiously he partly opened one eye, to close it swiftly as he glimpsed a man stooped over the stricken beast. The one glance showed him the man was Sleeman, the killer he had been trailing for days.

Warily Garrick felt for his revolver. As he expected, his holster was empty. He was unarmed, utterly at the mercy of a man who had already shot and killed one member of the Mounted. Chill fingers tapped on Garrick's spine

at the thought. The shock galvanised his numbed brain into action.

As he lay motionless, trying to scheme a way out of his desperate predicament, an insistent question pounded in Corporal Garrick's mind. Why had Sleeman fired? Why had he betrayed his presence in that arid section of Southern Alberta, when the man must have known that the Mounted had lost his trail—were hunting blindly?

A gurgling noise interrupted the trooper's thoughts, made him risk another squint, and gave him the answer to his question. Sleeman had grabbed the water-bottle tied to the saddle and was greedily swallowing its contents.

Thirst!

A grim smile of understanding flitted across the policeman's face.

Thirst!

The seven days that had passed since the murder had been dry, torrid. Sleeman's horse had been shot the first day; since then afoot and without food, and only what trickles of water he could find in the dried-out sloughs of an arid district, Sleeman had been hounded from cover to cover. His fear

of arrest would have kept him away from the few wells, for he would know they would be watched. Now, at sight of Garrick, sheer, torturous, maddening thirst had urged him to send a hot slug crashing into Garrick's horse, to procure the water his parched body craved.

A swift shadow and the sound of heavy breathing made the corporal stiffen himself. The man was bending over him. Garrick sensed the heavy gun frowning down on him, for tense seconds braced himself against the sharp agony of a bullet. It did not come. Instead, Sleeman cursed avidly as, straightening up, he brought a gasp from the Mountie with a vicious boot. Again the boot thudded against Garrick's ribs. Grimly he clenched his teeth against the pain, kept his eyes closed, remained motionless.

"Quit playin' possum." Sleeman's voice was brittle with hate. Garrick kept quiet, his brain racing furiously. Another oath spurted from the murderer's lips, followed the sound of steel on leather as he holstered his weapon. Garrick braced himself.

"Mebbe you've got some coin on you." The corporal felt two hands fumbling at the flaps of his pockets. It was his chance.

THE FIGHT

His eyes snapped open as, with one terrific heave, he jerked half upright and smashed his head into the killer's face. A surprised oath burst from Sleeman as, staggering backwards, his right hand leaped for his gun.

Garrick moved with frenzied speed. With both hands he grabbed for Sleeman's wrist and hung on. The heavy revolver was jerked clear and went spinning to the grass. A tense pause as both men got to their feet, then Garrick swung for his opponent's head. Huge arms extended, bellowing lurid threats, Sleeman sprang to meet him. Eyed

only by a stricken horse, the two men battled for their lives.

Face white and set, every fibre tensed and quivering, Garrick set himself to battle grimly, with every ounce of his strength, every trick he knew, for his opponent was a huge brute of vast strength. Sleeman fought red-faced and wildly, growling horrible oaths; sought to get the Mountie within the embrace of his powerful arms. Garrick ducked and dodged, shooting in swift punches at every opening.

His left caught Sleeman full on the chin; he expected to see the man drop as he heard his jaws snap tight. Instead the man grinned through blood-flecked lips, shook his head and rushed. Desperately Garrick pounded at that unguarded, bristly face, put all he had into the blows. Sleeman still came on, his huge hands outstretched. The Mountie slipped; before he could regain his balance, his ribs were being crushed. Sleeman's face, an inch from his own, was leering at him.

"Got you now, Mountie." Sleeman's voice rasped as he saw the agony on Garrick's face, tensed powerful muscles to their limit. Garrick felt his spine being curved slowly backwards; the torture forced a groan to his lips. Desperately he struggled to get a hand free. The pressure increased. Black mists commenced to well before the Mountie's eyes, but one thought persisted in his brain as he saw the huge veins swelling on Sleeman's neck; he must get one hand free.

The fists twisted into an iron ball in the small of his back, dug even deeper, the sharp agony made Garrick twist and writhe in convulsive torture, caused him to ache and throb in every fibre. Furiously he struggled afresh—and his right hand jerked free.

With all his fast-waning strength he rained short jabs at the brutal face leering at him. Sleeman grinned, buried his face in the Mountie's shoulder to escape the blows; the veins in his neck swelled larger.

The sight caused to some unassailable portion of Garrick's brain. For a space his head cleared, something seemed to shout to him now! Swiftly he unclenched his fist and, even as his spine commenced to crack, with the edge of his hand struck and struck again at those purple veins. A sharp grunt broke from Sleeman; his arms relaxed. Again Garrick struck with savage strength. The huge arms slipped away; his face purple with pain, Sleeman staggered back, clasped a hand to his neck.

Garrick's battered face was numb, his body ached in every joint and muscle, his arms felt like leaden weights, but something insisted he must finish the job. As Sleeman stood there swaying on his feet, still feeling his neck in a surprised way, the corporal swung with all his strength to the heart. Again he smashed at the same mark, knew it was useless to pound the leather face. Sleeman tottered weakly. Garrick braced himself, then, with all his weight behind it, swung his right to the side of the neck. With a grunt Sleeman half turned, sprawled to the grass.

Breathing in gasps, the Mountie bent over him. A sharp click and the handcuffs were in place. Straightening up, Garrick found that he was shaking like a leaf; reaction had set in. He had caught the killer. And Garrick knew that the same reaction would affect other members of the Force engaged in the hunt, for the strain of searching for a killer is terrific.

Since Sloane had been killed, gay, laughing troopers had been grimped, trail-weary men, but to Garrick had fallen the honour of arresting the man. A scrambling sound and the rattle of equipment caused Garrick to turn. The wounded horse was trying to regain its feet. Swiftly the Mountie crossed to the animal.

Garrick's eyes were clouded as he carefully inspected the wound. He drew a sigh of relief. The bullet had lodged in the near shoulder muscle;

once removed, the animal would recover. A little water from the bottle, soothing words, and Ned, Garrick's partner of many a long trail, staggered to his feet, stood regarding his master with pain-clouded eyes.

The Mountie continued to talk to the animal when a slight rustling made him whirl swiftly. Just in time he jumped—Sleeman was crawling to where the pistol had fallen. The man cursed as Garrick hauled him back, picked up the weapon.

"I'll get away on you yet, Mountie," Sleeman's voice rasped. "Don't think I'm going to be chief actor at a necktie party, do you?" He glared balefully. Garrick did not answer. He had been given a shock and it had helped to clear his punch-drunk brain. He was searching for his own pistol. He found it near the horse, half-concealed in the grass where the killer had dropped it as he tore loose the water-bottle. Sleeman eyed his movements.

"I should've stuck it in me belt." He spewed an oath. Garrick ignored him; he was getting his bearings.

THE EMERGENCY CABIN



That Sleeman's threat of escape was no idle one he was well aware, which made it all the more urgent that he get the man behind the bars with-

out delay. Even as he got his reckonings, he pondered as to why the man had not shot him as he lay helpless; but he would question him about that later. He turned to the man. His tone was curt.

"My post is forty miles away; but we have an emergency cabin at Dry Creek. That's about eight miles.

There'll be grub there and blankets. Think you can make it?"

A leer was on Sleeman's face as he lurched to his feet, stood glaring at his captor.

"Think I can make it? Feller, I'd do twice that to get some good eats. You don't think you hurt me that bad, do you?" It was a sneer. "And, Mountie, with grub to give me strength I'll be busting these toys." He jangled the handcuffs, laughed coarsely.

A queer feeling assailed the corporal; the man seemed so confident he would get away. Again Garrick wondered, as he gazed at the brutal features, why Sleeman had not shot him as he lay helpless. His curiosity forced the question. A venomous gleam showed in Sleeman's eyes as he answered.

"I had it all doped out, Mountie, that I'd get your horse so's to get a drink, then I was going to leave you tied, see? Let you know what thirst was and let the flies have a go at you. Shooting's too good for the likes of them that won't let a feller make an honest living."

"Honest living?" Garrick's lips curled even as an inward shudder shook him at the sheer callousness of the man. "Call selling rotgut moonshine to the oilfield workers an honest living? You were given the hint to clear out, Sleeman, but laughed at us. And when Sloane went to arrest you, you——" Garrick's voice broke. He was remembering Sloane, lying so still and quiet, his holster flap fastened. Cold fury filled him.

Sleeman laughed.

"And that Mountie only got what was coming to 'im." The brutish visage was thrust forward. "I was only tending to a few thirsts."

"Thirst!" Garrick's feelings got the better of him as he gazed at the man who had caused so much misery in the district. His voice trembled with intensity. "Yes, thirst made of you a murderer. Thirst caused that poor brute to suffer." He pointed to the

wounded horse. "Thirst, Sleeman, was——"

Sleeman cut in with a growl. His tone was mocking.

"Why, Mountie, you didn't oughta be wearing that uniform, you oughta be a parson." His eyes narrowed suddenly. "Feller, you——" He finished with a curse and rushed with manacled arms uplifted to smash the trooper down. But Garrick had seen those eyes narrow evilly; he stepped swiftly aside, kicked Sleeman's shins. The man crashed heavily to the grass.

"You fool!" Garrick had his gun out, was glaring down at Sleeman. His voice became very quiet. "Sleeman, I'm only human, so don't tempt me too far. Can't you see, man, I'm aching to shoot you?" Caution gleamed in Sleeman's eyes as he scrambled to his feet. Garrick went on:

"Try that just once more, Sleeman, and I take you in dead!" He eyed his prisoner coldly. His throat worked convulsively as hate welled up in him. He fought for control, again became a disciplined policeman. "Get going!" He waved the weapon.

Sullenly Sleeman tramped away, the Mountie and crippled animal at his heels.

Daylight was waning as the wearied men and wounded horse halted outside the small cabin at Dry Creek. Garrick's first thought was for his mount that had so gamely made the arduous journey on three legs. Unlocking the well-cover he drew a pail of water. Eagerly the animal drank.

Again the Mountie drew a filled bucket, motioned to Sleeman. The man drank thirstily, lifting the bucket awkwardly with his manacled hands. Garrick drank his fill, then, driving Sleeman ahead, stabled his mount, not for an instant letting his prisoner out of his sight. The malevolent grin on the man's features hinted at cunning thoughts.

At the point of the gun Garrick drove his captive into the small cabin, thrust

him on to a bunk, and lashed him there, then turned to the phone. In curt sentences he reported what had taken place. Hanging up the receiver, he turned to Sleeman.

"One of our fellows is heading out right away with two spare mounts. He'll be riding all night, so will be here first thing in the morning. I'm taking no chances of your getting away."

Sleeman twisted in his bonds, his eyes squinted evilly.

"You gotta sleep, ain't you? You're about all in from the walloping I give you. Feller, I won't be here when that other Mountie arrives." His tone was a challenge. Garrick accepted it. Grimly he resolved that not for one moment would he let the man out of his sight unless he was well secured.

HORSE MEDICINE

He tested the lashings, then, turning away, lighted a lantern. Ignoring the baleful eyes watching his every move, he opened a small cupboard, extracted medical supplies and a full bottle of brandy. A cunning gleam came into Sleeman's eyes as he saw the liquor. He licked his lips as the corporal drew the cork. His voice was wheedling.

"Atta boy, Mountie, guess we both needs a drink."

Garrick swung on him savagely, his eyes gleaming.

"Hasn't thirst got you in deep enough? This is not for you or me either, it's for the poor brute out in the barn."

Sleeman cursed, sneered. Ignoring him, the trooper picked up the bottle, dressings and instruments, and strode from the room.

A full hour later Garrick re-entered the shack; he was white and shaken. It is not nice to see a friend suffer, to add to that pain, but he had extracted the bullet and Ned was resting quietly, narcotised with several ounces of cognac.

The prisoner roused from a doze at the Mountie's entrance. Again his eyes sought the bottle.

"Mountie, you ain't used half of it, and I ain't had a drink for a week. Loosen up; be a good feller."

"No." Garrick was replacing the bottle in the cupboard. "This is horse medicine."

Sleeman chuckled malevolently, his eyes glared with baffled greed.

"All right, teller, but I bet I'll swaller that lick'er yet."

Garrick answered as he set about preparing food.

"You'll be sorry if you do."

"Why?" The evil eyes bored into Garrick's back. The trooper did not reply, he was occupied with cooking.

The prisoner wolfed the food greedily, handling knife and fork clumsily with his manacled hands, his plea to be released of the bracelets having been ignored. He gulped the coffee handed to him, then begged for a smoke. In silence the two men puffed at their pipes.

Sleeman's eyes were fixed on the handcuffs fastened to his wrists. Corporal Garrick eyed him quietly, wondering what was going on behind that brutish brow. The man looked up, encountered the Mountie's glance. He grinned ingratiatingly.

"Say, Corp, I won't be able to sleep with these things on; see how me wrists are swelled already?"

Garrick remembered Sloane, recalled other matters. His tone was cold.

"Then you won't sleep. I'm not taking them off. Besides, you boasted a while ago that with food under your belt you could break them." A thin smile tightened his lips.

For answer, Sleeman commenced to tug and strain with all his strength at the manacles. His face grew purple, virulent oaths spilled from his lips as he wrenched and tore at the thin length of chain. Corporal Garrick continued to smile even as his hand slipped to his holster. Panting, his face purple, the

prisoner gave it up. He snarled at his captor.

"I've busted city police bracelets, but guess these is stronger, eh? All right, Mountie, you warned me not to touch that brandy; I'm warning you not to go to sleep, see? But I'm going to have a nap." With that he stretched out, became still.

Corporal Garrick continued to sit in his chair. From time to time he changed his position. Hurts he had received in the fight began to throb and burn. Longingly he eyed the other bunk; it invited his bone-weary body. Sleeman was snoring stertorously.

The trooper glanced at his watch and groaned inwardly. Stanton would not arrive for at least seven hours. Seven long, weary hours. Again he eyed the other bunk. Quietly getting to his feet, he bent over the prisoner. The man's heavy breathing denoted deep sleep. The corporal picked up the lashings he had removed when the man ate his supper. Sleeman's position prevented his tying his arms; he was flat on his back, but his feet were adjacent to an upright. Speedily Garrick roped them tightly.

Back in his chair the corporal considered the matter. If the man got free he knew his life would not be worth anything. Sleeman was a man potentially standing on the gallows. He would not hesitate to kill his captor at the first chance. Yet—Garrick could count the hours of sleep he had had in the past week on the fingers of both hands. He was deadly tired, played out.

NO EXCUSE

But he must keep awake for a few more hours. Even as the resolve formed in his drowsy brain, his pipe clattered to the floor from relaxed lips. He sought and found a book. The print blurred before his weary eyes; sentences became meaningless.

Again he got to his feet and bent over his captive. To all appearances,

the man was as played out as he was, would sleep until roused. But again, he knew Sleeman was an old campaigner, had no doubt trained himself to sleep deeply for any length of time, could awaken at will. Wearily the Mountie again sought his chair, resumed his vigil. He must not sleep. The thought repeated itself. But outraged nature became stronger than will-power; his struggles grew weaker. Sleep claimed his tired, battered body.

The first streamers of daylight were flickering in the eastern sky as Corporal Garrick, head athrob, brain dazed, opened pain-weighted eyes. For a time he stared blankly at the sky. What was he doing outside? He tried to struggle to his feet, and found he was bound hand and foot. His face felt sticky. With an effort he lifted his head, tried to speak. A cloth was bound tightly about his mouth.

Slowly his numbed brain realised it all. Sleeman had awakened and caught him asleep. The man must have untied his feet, crept up to him, smashed him unconscious, then found the key and released the handcuffs.

The corporal groaned aloud as the sheer horror of his position forced itself upon him. He forgot his hurts and the cruel chafing of the rope in the wave of mortification that engulfed him. He had captured his man and allowed him to escape. There was no excuse for that. Garrick groaned again.

His eyes blank with misery, he lay staring at the fast-brightening sky. Resentment filled him; he fought and tugged at his lashings. They refused to give. Fast-spreading daylight revealed to him his position. He was staked out, flat on his back, to four poplars.

To ease his aching head he again lifted it as far as his bonds would allow; he passed a dry tongue over cracked lips. His throat was parched, burning, even now. He gazed about him. He was about two hundred yards from the cabin, he judged, securely hidden in a grove of small bush.

But why had Sleeman gone to all the trouble of packing his senseless body that far and staking him out? Why hadn't the man finished the job in the cabin? He wished that the man had. This meant his finish; he had allowed a prisoner to escape. According to the code, there was but one way to vindicate himself, and that was to recapture the man.

To recapture Sleeman? Garrick smiled grimly. His chance of even getting loose were slim, let alone recapturing the man. Weakly he again dropped his head.

Dully he watched the flush of full daylight sweeping over the heavens. Daylight! The shock cleared his brain; he had forgotten Stanton. Then despair again swept over him. Stanton! Yes, he would arrive, read all the signs and conclude Sleeman had got away and Garrick had gone after him.

There would be no signs of foul play in the cabin; he could leave it to Sleeman to see to that. And Stanton would not take up the search so near to the cabin, would not dream his comrade was so near, but would ride in ever-widening circles in search of the two men. And Garrick could not call out. He chewed fiercely at the gag. It was tied with brutal harshness.

Gad, though, but he'd like a drink; his whole body was aflame with fever. Again he forced his head a few inches from the ground, gazed about him. And then he saw, understood the fiendishness of Sleeman. A few feet away stood a pail brimming with water. Cool, sweet, tempting water. Garrick stared, strained to reach it, and then he saw something else. Resting against the pail, weighted at the bottom with a heavy rock, was a sheet of paper. On it was scrawled one word: "THIRST."

Thirst! Garrick's brain rocked as the awfulness of it all hammered into his mind. Sleeman had not killed him, but had carried out his threat, had staked him out to be tortured by the sun, the flies and thirst.

Furiously Garrick fought with his bonds; the ropes only cut in more deeply. Panting, he relaxed. Thirst! He would be found eventually, that was certain; but would they find him in time?

The drumming of hoofs made him turn his head; his heart raced with sudden hope. Stanton had arrived. Mixed sounds reached his ears. He visualised Stanton's surprise; then he heard him calling. Desperately he struggled to reply. A muffled groan was all he could utter. And Stanton was within ear-shot!

What would the boy do? Garrick concentrated with all his power, tried the forlorn hope of telepathy. Again he heard the thudding of hoofs, and knew they were receding. He knew what that meant. Stanton had ridden away to where a slight rise would give him a good view of the surrounding country. Desolation engulfed the corporal. Water was near, aid was near, yet he could not secure either.

OLD GIP



And he had lost his prisoner. Mental anguish added to his physical pain. His tortured brain again slipped into oblivion.

The sun was just peering over the rim of the prairie when Garrick slowly roused from his stupor. Confusedly he was aware that something warm and rough was caressing his face, that hands were busy chafing his wrists. With a groan he sat up.

"Take it easy, old-timer."

"Stanton?" With bewildered, clouded eyes the corporal gazed at the other trooper. Stanton nodded.

"And also old Gip." Then the corporal saw the dog. He tried to say more, but his swollen tongue prevented it. He gazed at the water. Quickly Stanton held his water-bottle to his lips.

A few minutes and Garrick got to his feet. He stood there swaying, staring stupidly about him. He was saved! But—his heart turned to lead as he suddenly remembered.

"Stanton," his voice croaked. "Stanton, I've lost my prisoner."

"So I gathered." The younger man's tone was dry. "Read the signs, rode out to the bit of a hill and sighted nothing. Thought things over a bit, and decided to unleash Gip. He found you." Stanton paused, saw the dumb misery in Garrick's eyes, his tone became more gentle. "But we'll find him yet, old-timer, don't worry. What exactly happened?"

Garrick took another swallow of water, briefly explained. The constable whistled.

"Fell asleep, eh? Phew! Garrick, we've got to round up Sleeman or it means your finish."

"Yes." Garrick felt his strength returning, began to lead the way to the cabin. "But things are far worse now than they were before. The man is fed, has water and three guns; two pistols, and I bet he didn't leave my carbine."

The constable's answer was another whistle. His glance was filled with commiseration. Arrived at the shack, Garrick plunged his aching head into a basin of water. It refreshed him. His eyes glowed with grim resolution as he dabbed himself dry.

"Did you look at my horse?"

The constable nodded.

"Yes, and he's snoring. You doped 'im, eh?"

"Yes." Garrick was straightening up his uniform. He gazed about the cabin. "Not a weapon. Guess I'll use your carbine, Stanton." As Stanton returned with the weapon he gave further instructions.

"Take no chances, Stanton. If you

sight the man, shoot. I'll take full responsibility." He suddenly laughed wildly. "No chances. Hell, Stanton, what a sweet chance we have now he has the carbine. He'll pick us off at five or six hundred yards. And it's all my fault." His eyes were sombre. Not even to himself would he make excuse.

"It's all in the day's work." Stanton grinned cheerfully. Garrick stared at him. Remorse shook him. Perhaps this boy would be the next victim of a ruthless killer. A thought struck him.

"Stanton, if you sight the man, I command you to signal me and let me tackle him first. He'll shoot, you understand."

"Well, and are you any more bullet-proof than I am?" Stanton's tone was protesting.

"No, but see my point. It's up to me to get him, so's to vindicate myself." Nausea engulfed the corporal suddenly; the constable steadied him to a chair.

"Maybe, Garrick, you'd better rest up and leave this to me."

"No!" Garrick jerked to his feet.

"Well, then, have a tot of brandy."

The constable strode to the cupboard, flung wide the door. Garrick stared with dazed eyes. Stanton turned; his eyes were suspicious.

"Is that what made you sleep? Where's the empty bottle? We always keep brandy in these cabins."

"Eh? No bottle? Why, I used some last night on the horse; doped him." Garrick shook his head, tried to clear his befuddled brain. He walked over to the cupboard. "The bottle's gone, hasn't it?" Stanton continued to stare. Garrick became aware of the doubt in his eyes.

"You're wrong. I did not touch one drop. It was horse medicine."

"Well, where is it?" Stanton's tone was curt.

"Where?" A wild hope was beginning to bud in Garrick's mind. Why, Sleeman must have taken it. He kept talking about it last night." Suddenly

he smiled, slapped Stanton on the shoulder. The hope had borne fresh strength. "Let's mount, man, and after him." Eagerly he led the way outside, climbed stiffly into the saddle, ignored the constable's queries.

Thirst!

THE MISSING BRANDY

Sleeman had taken the brandy; no doubt had drunk it.

Thirst!

Almost recklessly Corporal Garrick urged his mount into a canter, the constable riding a hundred yards to his right.

An hour passed and Garrick was becoming worried. His lips twitched as he watched the dog nosing in and out of each clump of willows at Stanton's command. He owed his life to that dog; he dreaded to see a puff of smoke spurt from concealment, see the animal convulsed in death agonies.

The clean air cleared his brain somewhat; but queer, jumbled fancies flitted through his mind. Supposing that Sleeman was tougher than he thought? Supposing the man shot the constable first? Then he, Garrick, would feel like a murderer. He had allowed the man to escape. The fact that he had been dog-tired, that he had beaten a man of twice his strength in a rough and tumble, the corporal did not consider any excuse.

He became irritable and morose as men, horses and dog crossed and recrossed; searched with eyes and nose every inch of ground they covered. Why didn't Sleeman shoot, if he were able to, and get it over with? But no doubt the man also wanted a horse; would hold his fire to close quarters for that reason.

And the brandy? Garrick remembered the suspicion in Stanton's eyes. If he was carpeted for letting Sleeman get away, then, Garrick saw, the missing bottle would go against him. They

would naturally think, as the constable had thought, that he had drunk some, fallen into a stupor and become easy prey for his captive.

The sun was beginning to make its heat felt; Garrick's head again began to throb violently. He touched his wound, glanced curiously at his reddened fingers. Perhaps he had better leave the search to Stanton and lie down and rest.

The thought made him jerk upright in the saddle. Quit? Not while he could sit in a saddle. He urged his horse to faster gait; the motion stimulated him. Then he saw that the constable was waving frantically, was pointing to a clump of poplars.

He galloped over.

"Listen!" Stanton held up a hand. Faintly against the breeze was borne the deep barking of a dog. "Bet it's him! Why doesn't he shoot, though?"

Elation filled Garrick. He guessed why Sleeman didn't shoot; but he would not let Stanton take the risk. Leaving the protesting constable with the horses, carbine at the ready, he covered the distance to the trees. His heart was thumping violently. The dog was still giving tongue.

Quietly, slowly, the corporal threaded his way through the brush. This meant the end, one way or the other, of that he felt sure. If it wasn't Sleeman, then, by now, the man was miles away, had escaped the effects of his thirst.

He could see the dog now, standing with head upraised, voicing his discovery. The animal ceased to give tongue, turned and growled, as he heard the crackling in the bushes, then gave vent to a welcoming bark as Garrick slowly approached.

A deep breath, a tightening of his grip on the carbine, and Garrick plunged through the last screen of bushes. For a moment his heart leaped, caught and hung in his throat, then commenced to pound furiously, sent the blood racing through his veins. One glance had been sufficient. The man

sprawled on the grass was Sleeman.

Swiftly the corporal examined him, found no traces of any hurts. He snapped handcuffs on the hairy wrists. Straightening up, he fired two shots into the air. The pounding of racing hoofs told him that the constable was obeying the signal.

Sleeman sat on a chair in the cabin noisily gulping hot black coffee. His eyes were dazed. Setting down the cup, he passed a rough hand over his face, and lighting his pipe, glared sullenly at the Mounties.

"What time is it?" he growled.

Stanton glanced at his wrist-watch.

"Two o'clock, afternoon."

"Two in the afternoon?" Sleeman's eyes were bewildered; again he pawed his face.

"Yes, curse you, and you're lucky to be here at all." Garrick's tone reflected the utter weariness he felt. "We've worked on you for hours, walked you miles, round and round this shack. We thought we'd never bring you round."

The brutal face contorted with rage.

"Saved me for the noose, eh?" He shook his rough head. "But you've got me guessing. What knocked me out? I only drank a half-bottle of brandy, and I've often finished a full crock on my own without passing out." He slumped in his chair, glared sullenly.

Corporal Garrick felt no pity for the man, pitiful object though he was. He remembered Sloane, his wounded horse, his own hurts, and the callous staking out. This was his moment of triumph; he smiled grimly.

"In the Mounted, Sleeman, we catch hell if we lose a horse. To save mine I had to extract the bullet you shot into him. I had no vet. and cradle, no one to help me at all. Desperate needs make for desperate remedies."

He paused to enjoy the brutish bewilderment on Sleeman's face, went on:

"You may be damned tough, Sleeman, but you're not tough enough to gulp horse medicine."

"Horse medicine?" Again the scowling visage was thrust forward. The corporal nodded; his eyes were like iron, his tone cold.

"Yes. I had to use an anæsthetic when I probed, didn't I? I used a remedy common enough in the West in the old days, morphine mixed with brandy. That's what you swallowed."

"Of all the dir——" Sleeman lunged forward savagely. The constable slammed him back in his chair. Garrick moved over to a bunk, stretched himself out, added:

"And while I'm having a sleep, Sleeman, think this over. From the start to now you have only one thing to blame for all this—THIRST!"



a bad way to-day. He is without protection."

"Prove it," said Hereson.

Settling himself more comfortably in his chair, Morgan began:

"It was some years ago, when I was in charge of the Peel River post, that one spring two young men called. They were drifting down north on a prospecting trip. I checked 'em over and sent 'em on their way with my blessing. At the time I didn't dream that in a few months I'd be called on to arrest one of them on a charge of murder and robbery.

"That same year, just before freeze-up, one of 'em—by name Ripley—came barging into the post. He was all tuckered out from paddling up-stream for two days. He told a wild and lengthy story.

"He said that he and his partner had drifted along, poking around here and there. One day they ran across a cabin. Its occupant was dying of scurvy. There——" The sergeant broke off as Hereson interrupted with a roar.

"Old stuff. They minister to the stricken man. He dies, but leaves them a rich claim. He——"

"Exactly. Sounds like your fiction, doesn't it?" the Mountie cut in. "But this is my story and it is true. There was a lot of scurvy in the north that year owing to vegetable crops having been frozen."

Hereson grunted. The policeman continued.

THE WILL

"They did what they could for this old chap, whose name was Martin, but he petered out just the same. Before he died he made a will leaving all he had to Ripley and his partner, making but one condition—they were to turn half

of the gold already on hand and what they worked from the claim over to the authorities.

"This half was to go to Martin's son, providing the authorities could locate him. The partners willingly agreed to the terms because there was quite a lot of dust in the shack and the claim was a real find. But that same clause in the will was the cause of an almost perfect crime being perpetrated. It provided the motive.

"The partners worked the claim all summer, until it just naturally petered out. They checked over the gold on hand, and it rated about twenty thousand dollars. Good returns for one season's work.

"Then, according to Ripley's yarn, came friction. His partner, Kearson, on account of having to turn over half of the gold to the authorities, wanted to slide out of the country quietly and not report at any of our posts.

"Ripley said that he was dead against the suggestion. He wanted to keep a promise made to a dead man who had aided them to make a good stake. The partners argued the matter. Came one morning when they quarrelled so violently they almost came to blows. Mind you—the sergeant leaned forward—"this is what Ripley told me.

"Seeing that matters had come to a show-down, Ripley took the will and their only rifle and told Kearson that he was heading for the nearest police post alone to explain everything. they could then leave the country with their stake and all would be in order.

"Kearson balked at that. To Ripley's surprise he produced a pistol, ordered his partner to drop the rifle and will and head inland. He also told Ripley that when he returned he would find the shack burned down and he, Kearson, with most of the gold, missing. He added that he would leave part of the

gold in the cache, so that when Ripley returned with the police they would find the small amount of gold and not believe Ripley's story that his partner had threatened him. And, with diabolical cunning, he had also planned something worse."

The sergeant leaned back in his chair, regarded Hereson and me quietly.

"Am I boring you?"

We shook our heads.

"I must tell you all these details," he explained, "even at the risk of my story becoming tedious. So that when you have heard all you will be able to understand the minute scheming done by the criminal."

"Continue," said Hereson.

"Well," the sergeant resumed, "Ripley said that seeing cold murder in Kearson's eyes, he was only too glad to head into the bush as commanded, but he did not go far from camp. Shortly after noon he sighted flames and smoke. He waited until the next morning, figuring that by then Kearson would be well on his way, then cautiously approached the camp."

"He saw no sign of Kearson; smouldering ashes were all that remained of the cabin. Every nerve on the alert, he approached the ruins. He was surprised to find the rifle leaning against a tree; it was fully loaded. Then another thing caught his eye—caused him to gasp. Swinging at its usual mooring he saw their canoe. He wasted no time, but grabbed the rifle, hopped into the canoe, and headed for my post."

"A preposterous tale," Hereson interrupted. "Of course, after hearing it, you placed the man under arrest?"

"Not at first," the sergeant replied. "I ordered him to lead me back to the burned-out camp. The ashes were by then cold and I poked about in them. I discovered that which gave me a tremendous shock—the charred remains of a human being!

DAMNING EVIDENCE



"Gad!
Whilst I had
been poking
around Ripley
had remained
seated on a
log, nursing

the rifle and eyeing my every movement. The man was in a terribly upset condition. I saw that he had not noticed my discovery.

"Feigning indifference, I got to my feet, strolled over to him and asked him to show me their cache. In it I found gold. It was in buckskin pouches. A later assay proved it to be worth twenty-nine hundred dollars. There was also food in the cache.

"From that moment I commenced to doubt Ripley's yarn. By a trick I separated him from the rifle, then told him of the body I had found. He wouldn't believe me. I led him to the corpse; compelled him to help me lift it clear of the ruins.

"Gad! As you know, we fellows have to be customs officers, coroners, and everything else, as well as being policemen, in the north. I performed a post-mortem on the body and I don't mind telling you it was ghastly. A burned human form is not nice to handle. And this one was terribly burned; almost totally consumed. Every bit of skin and flesh had been burned from the skull, and the corpse was completely unrecognisable.

"But the autopsy brought to life a damning piece of evidence—a small hole in the carbonised skull. It had been made by a .22 rifle-bullet. I found the smashed bit of lead. I asked Ripley what he had to say to that. He stuck to his story.

"I hunted round in the ruins again and unearthed a number of tell-tale articles where the body had lain. Signet ring, watch, and things like that. After cleaning them Ripley identified them as having once belonged to Kearson.

Offered as explanation that someone had overheard him and Kearson quarrelling and, hearing Kearson's plan, also learned of the amount of gold on hand. After seeing Ripley depart this unknown had shot Kearson and taken most of the gold. Had, in fact, carried out in part Kearson's own plans. I thought his story a bit too thin and placed him under arrest. I told him why I had to do so.

"In the first place, for all I knew the gold I had found constituted the total amount. In the second place, the burned man had received a bullet through the head. In the third place, the canoe had not been taken. Other points were, Ripley had followed the safest plan, remained in the district and reported the crime himself, pretending ignorance of a corpse in the ruins, of course.

"Had he left it to chance for the crime to be discovered, and a check-up of my district showed he had run for it, he would have been apprehended. It is almost impossible for a wanted man to avoid arrest no matter what part of the world he goes to. Your clever criminal always pays a lot of attention to that last point. Schemes to avoid even suspicion. The ignorant crook commits a crime, then runs for safety; a foolish thing to do."

"The serious blunder the man made," cut in Hereson, as the sergeant paused, "was in not smashing in the burned skull before coming to you. Also in not concocting a simple story that he had returned from a hunting trip and found the shack burned and the body of his partner in it. In short, he couldn't resist the temptation for more dramatic effect."

"That is what I thought at the time." The sergeant gazed at Hereson thoughtfully. "But more serious blunders were made later. We buried the charred remains alongside the grave of Martin, the aged prospector. Owing to the stony nature of the ground we could not dig a deep grave, so, as Ripley and

Kearson had done for Martin, we piled rocks on top to prevent animals from molesting the corpse. I then took the prisoner to my post.

"While holding him there awaiting word from the outside I had all our chaps working hard to try and find out if anyone had disappeared recently. Not that we can keep tab of everyone in the north. It's a big country and harbours many people who prefer to remain unknown. The result of the check-up was that no known persons had died that summer, but most significant, no one had ever heard of an old prospector named Martin.

"That made me think a bit. I tackled Ripley about it; asked him why either he or Kearson had not reported at once when Martin had died. He replied that the gold fever had got into them and they hated to waste the time, considering that on their way out in the autumn would be sufficient.

"His answer didn't satisfy me. It raised the question in my mind as to whether the grave he had shown me as being Martin's wasn't just part of his scheme. In short, I doubted the old prospector part of his yarn from that moment. Later investigation proved that grave to be empty, but that fact was not learned until months later, as by then the frost was in the ground, and several feet of snow made it impossible to open the hole."

INTO THE SKIN OF THE MURDERER

The sergeant smoked quietly for a few minutes, then suddenly shot off at a tangent.

"Hereson! How do you dope out your detective yarns?"

"Why——" Hereson's face registered surprise. "I try to get into the skins of my characters. Think as they would think."

The sergeant nodded.

"That is the way I try to work out real cases," he said. "Murder is a

grave charge. Official executions are awful affairs. I had charged a man with murder. I wanted to give him every chance to prove his innocence if he were innocent. I tried my damndest to get his view-point. But the more I thought about it the worse it looked for him.

"A chap who works at a crematorium once told me the terrific heat it requires to reduce a corpse to ashes. There is not one case on record of human bodies being totally destroyed in burning buildings. Few people know of this fact. I came to the conclusion that the old prospector had never existed, that Ripley had happened on a claim by chance, and that when it petered out Ripley had shot his partner, then attempted to hide all traces of his crime by trying to destroy the body with fire. Noting, after the fire had died down, that there yet remained charred remains, in a panic he had paddled to my post, concocting the story he had told me on the way."

"A sound hypothesis," Hereson agreed.

"That is what I thought," the sergeant resumed, "but I was wrong. Just the same, I told Ripley my conclusions. I urged him to come clean and admit that he had quarrelled and fought with his partner. Had shot him. If he would I would reduce the charge to manslaughter. He stuck to his version of the affair. It sounded so highly improbable I lost patience with the man. A few weeks later I took him outside to Edmonton to stand his trial.

"I was the chief witness; the Crown prosecutor made ten points out of every word I said. It was awful the way he hammered home each point.

"The accused had been found to be in the possession of gold, food, a loaded .22 rifle, and a canoe. Means to kill and run. Instead of taking flight he had attempted the safest plan, remained in the district and himself brought the police to the scene of the crime. Such an act proved that the

prisoner had planned his dreadful crime with consummate nerve and skill.

"For months, for reasons of personal gain, he had schemed to murder his partner. The story the accused had told to the police was absurd. Gad!" Morgan mopped his forehead. "I can hear that prosecutor speaking yet; still see the faces of the jurymen.

"Ripley had a good defence counsel and the chap did his best. But he hadn't an argument left after the prosecution got through. He argued that the post-mortem had been performed by a policeman without the slightest training in medicine. He tried other arguments. He then tried to get the charge reduced to manslaughter; stated that his client had admitted to quarrelling with his partner. It was useless. The jury brought in a verdict of guilty of murder and Ripley was sentenced to be hanged by the neck until he was dead. As is usual in Canada, the date for the execution was set three months ahead—February 11th, to be exact."

"I was commended for my good work and given thirty days' leave. I decided to spend my vacation in Edmonton and have my teeth attended to. I went to my usual dentist. While working on me he talked a lot about the case. He told me one thing which gave me a terrible shock. He informed me that no matter how badly a corpse is burned, it is rarely sound teeth are destroyed. I had hardly glanced at the jaws of the remains I had found.

"After thinking the matter over I hastened to the jail at Fort Saskatchewan, where Ripley was confined. He was very decent to me. He told me that Kearson had possessed a perfect set of teeth. Also, though, he added that there was no doubt in his mind but that the charred remains I had found were those of his late partner. That last remark made me wonder if he was on the point of breaking down and confessing. I talked to him for a

long time, but he persisted he was innocent. I did not believe him.

EXECUTION POSTPONED

"I had been back at my post about two months when I was notified that the date of Ripley's execution had been set forward to permit further investigation of the case. It appears that Ripley's counsel had appealed on the grounds that the autopsy of the remains had been made by a man unskilled in medicine, myself, and the Court of Appeal had upheld him.

"The news brought me wonderful relief. After all, I had taken it for granted that the remains I had found were those of Kearson, but I would feel better if the fact were proven by men trained in the medical profession. But what puzzled me was, if the remains were not those of Kearson, then whose were they?

"But, as I said, I was wonderfully relieved. I wanted to see the jaw-bones of the corpse myself. Also, I wanted to open the grave supposed to contain the body of an aged prospector named Martin.

"In June the chief surgeon of the northern detachments, accompanied by a private doctor and Ripley's counsel, arrived at my post. I took them to the scene of the crime, quite a cavalcade. I insisted that we open the grave supposed to contain Martin's remains first. It was, as I had thought, empty. Ripley's counsel, who had hammered me all through the trial, paled a bit at that.

"We then opened the other grave. It contained the remains I had found in the charred embers of the shack. In the clearing the two medical men held their post-mortem. It was then my turn to pale. The upper and lower jaws contained not one single tooth!"

Hereson gulped, said: "But Morgan, that meant nothing. You had only the word of a man fighting to save his neck

from the gallows that his partner had perfect teeth."

"Yes," agreed the sergeant. "But the medical report stated that victims of scurvy almost invariably lose their teeth before they die."

"Good God!" exclaimed Hereson, understanding showing in his eyes.

"Exactly," the sergeant went on. "Inconceivably ghoulish, eh? I worked frantically from then on. I got a full description of Kearson from Ripley and had it circulated. Weeks later he was picked up in England. He broke down and confessed to what we already suspected. He had dug up Martin's corpse, put a bullet through the skull, then placed it in the shack and set fire to the building.

"He had committed an almost perfect crime. He had avoided suspicion by having substituted a corpse and a few personal trinkets which would leave the police to believe that the body was that of himself. He had left the canoe behind and made his way outside by the simple procedure of walking about a hundred miles up-river to a native camp.

"There he hired a canoe and two Indian paddlers. He changed his name and reported at some of our river posts on his way to railhead at Waterways. As there was no hue and cry out for a man corresponding to his description, he was treated with the courtesy accorded any other traveller."

"But wait," interrupted Hereson. "What was the 'tiny oversight' he made? You'll recall you mentioned that at the beginning of your story?"

"Simple enough," replied the sergeant; "he had substituted the body of an aged toothless man for his own."

Hereson grunted, leaned forward, said:

"But now for the point of your whole story. Who is the man without protection.

Sergeant Morgan chuckled.

"Why, Kearson, of course. You'll

remember that Ripley had been brought to trial for murdering a man named Kearson. Had been found guilty and sentenced to the gallows. The discovery that Kearson was still alive, and the confession that Kearson made, caused the law to have Ripley's sentence quashed. Under our law, if a man has his sentence quashed he cannot be tried and sentenced again for

the same crime.

"Kearson was tried and sentenced on two counts—robbery and machination. He served his time and is again a free man. If Ripley killed Kearson to-morrow the law could not touch him. Because of the near perfection of his crime Kearson is absolutely without protection."

Followed thoughtful silence.





Constable Keron's Tactics

Fists Against Guns in the Construction Camp

EITHER you return with your prisoner or you remain out there."

The sentence kept repeating itself in the brain of Constable Keron, trail-weary from the two hundred-mile ride from his post, as he turned and twisted uneasily beneath his blankets in effort to ease his aching muscles.

Further parting words of the officer commanding his detachment seeped into his tired mind.

"I wish, boy, I could send another man with you. This man Hirst, whom you must arrest, is bad—a killer. But you know how short-handed we are."

Good old superintendent; zealous in upholding the traditions of the Force; yet, at the same time, anxious to protect the men of his command so far as he could. Constable Keron smiled into the darkness as he thought of his commanding officer. Remembering the character of the man he sought, his lips tightened.

Cartwright Hirst! A man wanted from one end of the American continent to the other for robbery-under-arms, murder, and even worse. A gunman who for almost a year had defied the authorities.

Remorselessly, the net of the law had tightened. With his guns Hirst had blazed his way into Canada—and disappeared. But the law never gives up. Word had reached the authorities that Hirst was skulking from camp to camp of a new railroad being blasted into a new gold-mining section in the very heart of the Canadian Rockies. A member of the Mounted had been sent to arrest him. Weeks had elapsed; the

Mountie failed to reappear.

Headquarters continued to keep the wires moaning with insistent command, an order the electrified strands carried to the farthestmost posts of the Mounted.

"At all costs, this man Hirst must be apprehended."

Had then arrived definite word that the fugitive was at number eleven camp. Superintendent Cornish of the Jasper Detachment had selected Keron for the dangerous task of carrying out the arrest.

In his solitary camp at the edge of number eleven, the young constable continued to ponder. Sheer fatigue ended his reflections. Constable Keron slept.

The metallic chatter of pneumatic drills, the silence-shattering booming of blasting charges, the panting of construction engines, awakened Constable Keron as the sun was just showing its rim above the towering peaks. Refreshed by his rest he stood for a few moments quietly surveying the scene of activity a few hundred feet below him.

Somewhere in that mob of men and animals was Hirst. Somehow he had to put the handcuffs on him—a man who had sworn to resist arrest as long as he could shoot. Hirst was aware that capture would mean the gallows, and it was no idle boast. Keron knew this and his mind was busy with his problem, as he went about the everyday task of attending to his horse.

That job finished, he cooked and ate his frugal breakfast. Then, having shaved and dressed, and adjusted his

equipment with meticulous care, he rode boldly and openly into the camp.

THE CONSTRUCTION CAMP

With his clean-cut, boyish features, his smartly-cut uniform—both himself and horse groomed to parade standard—he appeared curiously out of place in that crowd of roughly-dressed railroad builders. He noticed the many glances his appearance evoked. Most of the looks were friendly and accompanied by rough greetings. But a few of the stares were hostile. For Hirst was not the only law-evader who sought the sanctuary of the mountain camps.

No resident of the camp could know the constable's exact mission. He might be merely on patrol, or he might be after any one of the dozen characters temporarily on the payroll of camp eleven.

That was a point in his favour, thought Keron, for no doubt Hirst had his toadies—men who might aid him to avoid arrest if he needed help.

But the first thing to do was to locate Hirst. Even behind several weeks' growth of beard Keron was sure he would recognise him, for every member of the Mounted had the man's description and photograph imprinted indelibly upon his memory.

The far edge of the camp was reached without Keron finding the man he sought. Here the going became rougher. Dismounting, the constable tied his horse and commenced to clamber afoot over the rocks.

As he topped a boulder he wondered if Hirst had got word of his coming and had fled? Hardly likely, though, that he would let one solitary policeman drive him from the comparative security of the mountains out into the open.

Where was the man? Atop the boulder, Keron stared about him. A terrific roar answered his unspoken question. A tremendous force hurled him from the boulder to the rocks

below. For some moments he lay there, half-stunned. Scrambling to his feet, he carefully felt himself all over. A few bruises comprised his injuries. He looked about for the powderman who had touched off a charge almost beneath his feet. For he had stood in plain view of the workmen.

A coarse laugh greeted his ears, and he swung his head to the left. Showing above the boulder that sheltered its owner was an unshaven, leering face. Keron felt himself go suddenly taut. He was face to face with Hirst.

Climbing over the rock with cat-like agility, his face a chilling mask of hate, Hirst came unhesitatingly up to the Mountie. For a moment he surveyed him with the stony menacing stare of a wild beast. Then he spoke:

"Don't you know enough not to walk by a red flag in a hard rock camp?" A leer accompanied the words.

"You know there was not a flag up!" As he replied, Keron was sizing up the man, noting the huge, slightly-sloping shoulders that betoken unusual strength; the wide-legged crouch that showed the fast gunman, ready for whirling action.

"Maybe there wasn't," agreed Hirst, still leering. "But what's one little redcoat more or less? Few weeks ago one of your fellers walks right into a blast. Never found even a button. Funny, eh?" He chuckled gloatingly.

In spite of himself Keron shuddered. So that had been Morrison's finish! No wonder he had failed to reappear.

"I'm warnin' you," Hirst went on, "that cops is my meat!" His tone became venomous. "I can see the warrant you're carryin' right through your tunic. Don't pull it out—if you want to live!"

"And I'm giving you fair warning, too, Hirst." Keron spoke quietly. "I am not leaving this camp without you."

"Eh?" The evil face expressed sheer amazement. "What, a kid like you thinks he can do what other cops couldn't? Blast you!"—the young

constable's calmness appeared to irritate him—"I could plug you six times afore you could unbutton your gun-case."

"No doubt." Keron's voice revealed nothing of the turmoil of his mind. The man spoke the truth, yet he had to obey orders. How to overpower Hirst, separate him from the revolver he no doubt had hidden about his person, was the problem.

He glanced about him, noticed that many of the workers, attracted by Hirst's loud tones, had dropped their tools and edged closer. A scheme commenced to take form in the young constable's mind. A trick as old as mankind, yet often effective; a challenge to a man's physical prowess and courage. Keron turned again to Hirst, his voice deliberately, coldly, insulting.

"And I suppose that owing to your skill with guns you are cock-of-the-roost in this camp? You think that because you can shoot straight and fast you are a regular he-man?"

The answer was a roar of hate. Faster than the eye could follow Hirst had a heavy automatic in his right hand. Keron smiled grimly. He had touched the man's chief weakness, his vanity—but he was shaken by the realisation that his challenge had worked almost too well.

"Just what I said." He forced it out. "You want to settle everything with guns. You damned coward! Shoot! Murder me, and every man in this camp will turn against you. You're not liked among men you know, Hirst; they merely toady to you to avoid trouble. There isn't a man here who will try to prevent my taking you prisoner. They'll be glad to be rid of you."

Evidently, Hirst saw the soundness of the constable's words, for, slowly, reluctantly, he replaced the pistol in his shirt. Uncertainly, he stared at the crowd, and as uncertainly looked at the policeman, waiting for him to continue. Keron turned to the onlookers.

"Men, I have a warrant for the arrest of Hirst, here. He tried to murder me a few minutes ago with a blasting charge. Now he invites me to shoot it out. That, considering his skill with guns, amounts to practically the same thing as murder. I am not much good with a revolver, but I am handy with my fists. In the presence of you all I ask Hirst if he has guts enough to stand up to a damned good pummelling?"

"Eh?" Hirst seemed unable to credit his hearing, then a howl of derision burst from him and he pointed a derisive finger at the Mountie.

"Look, fellers, look what's goin' to give me a poundin' with his fists! Look at 'im, a pink an' white boy. An' after I've licked you, what then?" He turned to the constable.

A DESPERATE PLAN

"If you do lick me," was Keron's quiet response, "I shall be through with the Mounted. If I beat you the bracelets will never leave your wrists until I have you in a cell."

At that, Hirst hesitated, glanced about him. Keron guessed what Hirst was thinking—he had permitted the Mountie to talk him into doing something that might prove his undoing. But snatches of conversation showed that the constable's plan had met a responsive chord in the breasts of the other men of the camp.

It was a desperate plan at best, Keron realised, as he compared Hirst's superior bulk, but it was the only way. His O.C.'s parting words again echoed through his mind:

"Either you return with your prisoner or you remain out there."

As Hirst still hesitated, Keron taunted him further.

"I thought you'd back down. Like all killers, you're yellow! You're afraid of a pounding!"

The taunt had the desired effect.

With one motion Hirst tore off his coat, concealed holster and gun, roared:

"Take your'n off, an' that pretty red coat, too, you'll never need 'em again."

Even as Keron struggled out of his tight-fitting tunic Hirst was upon him in one terrific, lunging gouging charge. There would be no rules to govern this fight. The constable gasped as the huge arms encircled him, the butting head smashed at his lips and chin. Grimly, silently, he settled himself to fight.

A sudden silence settled over the whole camp. The men gazing at the combatants were awed into quietness by the sheer primordial fury of the conflict.

Keron knew as he fought that if he ever went down those huge hands would never relax their grip on his throat while he lived. Not that that mattered; if he failed, he didn't want to live.

Gasping moments as the young constable writhed and twisted desperately to break free of the hug that was cracking his very ribs. Then the bigger man, his face purple, suddenly released his hold and staggered back. The onlookers marvelled at this; they had not realised the agony contained in each short-armed jab Keron had delivered at Hirst's heart.

Furiously, Keron fought to refill his aching lungs with life-giving air. Hirst, likewise, panted for seconds, then once more, with a bellow of rage, he charged.

Keron dodged the outstretched arms. Hammering into his brain was the thought that at all costs he must avoid that bear-like hug. The first grip had almost finished him. As Hirst stumbled past Keron brought a fist to the heart, another to the back of the head. Brain and heart. They were the vital points he must pound upon.

With the speed of a panther, arms still outstretched, Hirst whirled. Keron slipped on a loose pebble and in a trice found himself again enclosed as

in a steel vice. Hirst's face, an inch from his own, was leering at him.

"Got you now, Mountie!" Hirst panted it gloatingly as he tensed powerful muscles to their limit. Keron felt his spine being curved slowly backwards. Desperately he struggled to get a hand free. Black mists commenced to well before the Mountie's eyes, but one thought persisted in his brain as he saw the huge veins swelling in Hirst's neck. He must get one hand free.

The fists twisted into an iron ball in the small of his back dug even deeper, the sharp agony made Keron twist and writhe in convulsive torture. Furiously he struggled afresh—and his right hand jerked free.

With all his fast-waning strength he rained short jabs at the brutal face leering at him. Hirst buried his face in the Mountie's shoulder to escape the blows. It was a fatal move, for Hirst exposed the back of his neck. Two thudding blows right at the base of the skull and Keron felt Hirst's grip slipping. With all the force he had left he hit again, this time landing full on the nerve. With a gasp of pain Hirst staggered back.

Too winded to follow him up, Keron stood rocking on his feet. The tremendous strength of the man! One more hug and he'd be finished. His ribs were red-hot bars of agony; but he noticed with satisfaction Hirst was also badly damaged.

More moments they stood glaring at one another, then Hirst lowered his head, charged. Came a brisk smack and the gunman staggered away. He had run full on to a straight right.

Keron followed up his advantage. Instead of standing up to him Hirst suddenly stooped, grasped a heavy rock—heaved.

Straight for Keron's chest the missile sped. A gasp of rage went up from the onlookers. Barely in time the constable twisted. The stone ripped his

shirt from his torso—taking skin with it. Stimulated with a gust of fury the treacherous action evoked, Keron rushed. Like pistons his arms drove back and forth. Hirst lunged forward in a final arm-stretched charge. Keron stepped back, judged his distance, hit out with all he had.

There came a resounding smack as his fist landed full on the point of the jaw. Hirst's head jerked back, then forward, as he pitched face downward on the rocks—senseless.

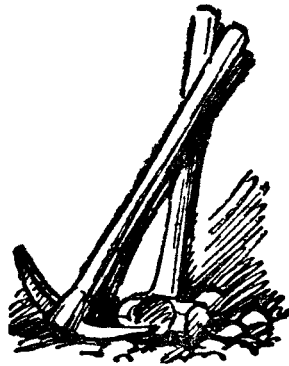
A wave of elation surged through Keron as he realised that his stratagem—youth, clean-living and science against a gunman—had succeeded.

Then he slipped on the handcuffs.

It was at Jasper a week later, with Hirst securely caged, that Keron recounted his experiences to the interested fellow members of his detachment. At the conclusion, Constable Graham remarked:

"Good stunt, Keron, refusing to shoot it out with a gunman and making him fight your way. But I wonder," he ended, "if he would have accepted your challenge had he known that you hold the middle-weight championship of the Western Division?"

Constable Keron's reply was a good-natured grin.



Panic

The Murderer Who Left No Trail

CRAVEN wanted to fight. His whole being was afire with maniacal urge to smash and pound and throttle. Bad whisky was adding to the fury of the murderous flames that roared within him. For Craven was both drunk and aflame with hate for another man. A dangerous combination.

He had been drinking heavily since the night before, when he had arrived at the northern outpost of Carcajou Bend from his trapping-grounds which lay four days' mush to the west. Right now, seated in his room in the settlement's one stopping-house, he had reached that critical stage of intoxication that usually precedes a fight or a spell of maudlin weeping.

Craven didn't want to weep—he

wanted to fight—and the man he wished to feel within the clutches of his huge hands was Jake Dennison, who owned and operated the post's one general store.

Actually, Craven's grievance against Dennison was but a trifling one, but months of solitary brooding about the matter had caused it to grow to gigantic proportions that were altogether out of proportion. To Craven the grievance had become an obsession that overshadowed everything else.

The whole trouble centred about a black or pole fox.

Back along in the middle of January, some three months before, Craven had sighted that which all trappers dream about—a black fox, standing motionless and within easy rifle range. It was



the chance of a lifetime. Sheer luck!

With hands that had trembled ever so slightly, Craven had raised his rifle and snuggled it against his shoulder. He had drawn a dead bead on the animal's head and, confident of his own sharp-shooting abilities, pressed the trigger.

Had followed only a click!

But that faint click had been sufficient. Seemingly with but one motion the fox had cocked its ears, turned its head and sighted the man, then raced away before the incensed trapper could eject the faulty cartridge and lever another one into the breech.

And as the fox ran, Craven saw that which made him rip out lurid oaths. That which assured him that neither he nor any other man would ever be able to trap that particular fox, for the beast loped away on three legs!

And that three-legged run told a whole story, explained that at some time or other the animal had been caught in a trap that had been too large and too strong. In consequence, the steel jaws had caught too high up on the leg and broken the bone. In the boreal atmosphere of the Far North it is only a question of a few minutes for the frozen skin and muscles of the trapped leg to be twisted off, and the fox runs away on three legs, ever after to be too cunning to be caught in a trap.

Craven had then stormed and cursed for minutes, had picked up the faulty cartridge and hurled it from him—to later retrieve it and examine it carefully, night after night, in the solitude of his shack.

And from that incident had grown the grievance.

Jake Dennison had sold him that particular cartridge along with others. It never entered Craven's head that in spite of the most rigid tests and inspections the odd cartridge will turn out to prove a misfire. He placed the whole blame upon the storekeeper. Dennison had sold him that cartridge, therefore Dennison was to blame. As soon as the

season was ended he would mush into Carcajou Bend and have it out with the man.

Now he was here; priming himself with liquor for the interview.

Reaching for the quart bottle on the table, he took another long, gurgling drink and his face twisted into a snarl of hate.

"The crook"—and he described the storekeeper in lurid and forceful oaths—"sold me some old stock; maybe some shells that had been condemned and what he bought cheap. Loses me a black fox."

He ceased his growling and glared around the small room—now filling with the shadows of late afternoon—with vicious, red-veined eyes. Taking another drink, he found that the bottle was empty; he threw it crashing on the floor and rose rather rigidly to his feet.

"Gonna have it out with him," he growled, "then get me some more liquor. The dirty——"

THE FIGHT



He swayed along the corridor, down the stairs and through the men in the lobby towards the door, his eyes fixed unwinkingly straight ahead. The blast of cold air that greeted him as he went outside cut through him, cleared his head a little. He braced himself on the slippery, icy path that ran along in front of the few buildings, and followed it towards Dennison's store. Dennison himself got up from his seat by the great pot-bellied stove in the middle of the room and glanced at him inquiringly.

One swift glance assured Craven that they were alone in the building.

He stopped squarely, although not very firmly in the middle of the room

as Dennison, seeing his condition, backed away. For Dennison was old and thin and frail, whilst Craven bulked huge, his natural bigness emphasised by the heavy clothing he wore.

"Wanna talk to you," he flung at the storekeeper. "You're crooked. Sell dud shells. Lost me a black fox."

"Eh?" Dennison asked in his high, cracked voice. "What d'you mean?"

Craven's fury increased. He reached out and shook the slight figure of the old man until his ancient bones fairly rattled.

"Listen, Dennison," he snarled, and in lurid, forceful language described what had happened. "So," he ended, "either you pay me for that fox or I'll murder you."

Dennison knew men and, in spite of his frail build, was not without courage.

"You big oaf!" he sneered, succeeding at last in wriggling free from Craven's hold. "You're drunk! You're talking wild! I bet you imagined all this. You'd better quit living alone and camp in town for a while."

Dennison's attitude was fatal. He should have tried reasoning, not defiance, for he was confronted by a man rendered insane by months of twisted emotions and maniacal obsession.

"Imagined it, eh?" bellowed Craven, the liquor burning fiercely in his brain now. "Why, damn you"—he lunged forward with two huge hands extended to clutch the storekeeper's skinny windpipe. With a shrill cackle of fear Dennison dodged and started for the door. The old man's fear in some incomprehensible way convinced Craven of his guilt.

His huge hands darted forward and clutched Dennison about the waist. There was an insane green light in his eyes now. He tensed huge muscles and heaved, curving backwards. A shrill scream bubbled from the storekeeper as his body described an arc through the air above Craven's head and crashed against the huge, heavy iron stove.

Craven heard that sickening crash in a sudden overwhelming agony of regret. He wheeled to face the stove.

"God!" he whispered, staring down in fascinated horror at the blood welling slowly from the storekeeper's head. "God! He's dead! I've killed him!"

He forced himself to make sure; bent over the inanimate form. When he straightened up his skin was clammy with ice-cold sweat. Dennison was stone dead; his skull split.

Craven stepped back into the shadows of the big room and tried to think. The nearest Mounted Police post was at Peel Point, a day's journey away.

"God!" he repeated. "That gives me at least two days afore Corporal Brainard'll be on my trail. They've gotta fetch him first." He stared down again at the storekeeper's lifeless form, and panic seized him.

"God!" he whispered hoarsely. "I gotta get outa here quick!"

FLIGHT



As Craven rushed along, driving his dogs mercilessly, he was seeing in his mind's eye a grim, relentless figure trailing along behind him.

Corporal Brainard of the Mounted. The thought increased his panic, for he knew Corporal Brainard; knew him to be a tireless, relentless hunter of law-breakers.

The fact that he must have at least two or three days' start did not ease his fears. He knew the reputation of the members of the Mounted. True, there were those who sneered at that reputation, who said it was all a lot of nonsense. But Craven, like all men who knew intimately of the Mounted Police and their work, knew that it was true. The Mounted never give up. Once

they set out to follow a trail they hang on until they either catch their quarry or, that most rare of all things, the hunted man is able to disappear utterly and for all time, leaving no vestige of a trail behind him.

Craven had never heard of such a case—excepting where the wanted man had committed suicide or met his death in some other way. He did not intend to commit suicide or to die; in some other way must he sever the trail between himself and the policeman he felt sure was even now on his track. But how?

Now and again he glanced backward along the trail, clear and deep in the otherwise trackless white waste; a ribbon of marred snow that showed clearly the route he had taken. A tangible link connecting him with Dennison's sudden death. It was because of that plain trail that during his flight his face had become haggard, even as the panic gnawing within his breast became stronger.

He looked back at his own trail and cursed deep and long, his eyes glaring like the eyes of a cornered animal.

It was panic, stark funk, that caused him to curse and rail against fate.

Another day he mushed along, and now, as he clicked along on his snowshoes, he was praying that it would snow. A blizzard would smother his trail and give him a chance to swing away towards the mountains a short day's travel on his right. On the other side was Alaska, and, he hoped, comparative safety. He had plenty of grub on his load, and, given the chance, say, of a blinding storm and darkness, he could make up a pack-sack, turn loose his dogs and head across the mountains afoot. A desperate expedient, but the only way to shake the Mountie he felt was plugging along so relentlessly and tirelessly not so many miles behind him.

A storm! A screaming, howling blizzard that would blanket the whole countryside in its concealing folds and

utterly baffle any who sought to follow his trail.

In that event, then Corporal Brainard would keep right on—Craven felt sure of that—would continue along the main trail, trusting to luck to again pick up the trail of the man he sought. Instead—and Craven grinned mirthlessly through frost-rimmed lips—he would be slogging it across the mountains. And then, perhaps, if the policeman found his dogs, he would conclude that Craven had become lost in the blizzard and perished, and so give up the hunt. Yes, it would not be hard to fool Corporal Brainard if only it would storm.

And then Craven suddenly halted his dogs and sniffed the wind; stared at the sky. There was no doubt about it, he smelt snow. Hope commenced to subdue the wild panic in his breast as he watched huge, billowing, yellow-tinted clouds surging up from the horizon. A storm threatened; a real, many days, northern blizzard. He yelled aloud in his relief and again started up the dogs.

Quietly, very gently at first, the snow commenced to fall, and to Craven each tiny flake that touched his bristly face was as the caress of freedom. He stopped and looked back at the trail. Already it was being blotted out by the whirling snow; in another hour it would be hidden completely.

Craven chuckled and laughed aloud in insane glee as, now almost hidden by the swirling white folds, he halted his dogs and commenced hurried preparations to set out on foot. With practised ease he threw together a pack-sack of sleeping-bag and food, axe, frying-pan and coffee-pot, that was as nothing to his giant strength when he had lashed it upon his shoulders.

He ripped the harness from the dogs and scattered the remainder of the dog food among them, and howled aloud with maniacal joyousness as, without questioning this unexpected feast, they flung themselves upon the

food in a fighting, snarling mob.

Straightening up, rifle in hand, he shook the weapon towards where he thought Corporal Brainard would be. "Come on, Corp!" he yelled. "Trail me now—if you can!"

LEAVING NO TRAIL

Chuckling from time to time, leaving dogs and sled behind him, he strode away towards the mountains, leaning with a fierce sort of pleasure against the buffeting wind, drawing in deep, powerful breaths of tingling air. He was now leaving no trail behind.

Exhilarated by his new-found sense of freedom, Craven kept on and on, glorying in his giant strength that even the now fiercely-screaming blizzard could not weaken. It was the kind of a storm that would have made short work of a greenhorn, but Craven was an experienced northerner; he felt he had nothing to fear. He had been afraid when leaving that broad trail for Corporal Brainard to follow, but he was not afraid of the elements.

When he camped that night it was still snowing, and after a hearty meal he crawled into his sleeping-bag and dropped off to sleep quite content.

When he awoke it was still dark, but dawn was imminent, and, although the wind had died down and it had ceased to snow, the inches-thick white blanket all about him told him that it had snowed well on into the night. And there was not the slightest trace of his own trail leading up to his camp-site at the foot of the mountains.

Grinning and chuckling, he cooked and ate a hearty breakfast. Let Corporal Brainard or anyone else try to find him now!

The meal ended he commenced the stiff climb over the mountains, swinging his snow-shoes with new strength and confidence in his stride, and with the coming of daylight the wind again got up and more snow commenced to

fall, hiding his trail as fast as he made it, causing him to chuckle aloud, mockingly, as he thought of Corporal Brainard.

At noon he halted long enough to boil a billy of hot, refreshing coffee and to bolt a slab of bannock, then again lashed on his webs and resumed his climb.

And the elements still aided him. Driving snow obliterated snow-shoe tracks as fast as he made them.

Mid-afternoon found him toiling up a great slope almost at the timber-line. Below him and to his right yawned a huge chasm. Above him towered the peak he must skirt to reach the valley beyond. All about him the world was white, silent, motionless and cold.

Sheer, stark panic had driven him into this remote spot untravelled by man and inhabited only by the wild things. But Craven gave no heed to that. By attempting the almost impossible, by trying to make it afoot over the mountains in a storm, he felt that he had rid himself for all time of the ones who would bring him to account for his crime.

As he halted for a moment to rest, the wind and snow eased up for a space and a deathly lull settled about everything. He stared back down the way he had come and, as he thought of Corporal Brainard, a great roaring, full-lunged laugh burst from him.

That insane bellow shattered the stillness and disturbed something. A flock of ptarmigan fluttered from one clump of scrub to another. In an instant, rifle ready, he was stealing up on the birds. Fresh meat! Only a man who has lived for days on bacon and hardtack can know how the mere sight of fresh meat can flood a man with desire that causes him to forget all else.

Slowly, quietly, scarce daring to breathe, Craven stole up upon the covey. In their winter plumage the birds were indistinguishable against the

snow. And then one moved—very slightly, but it was enough. The man fired and the bird became a mass of fluttering feathers, even as its companions whirled away.

In his eagerness to retrieve the bird, Craven did not notice something else; did not hear that which sounded even above the sharp crack of the rifle.

Above him a concussion jolted the mountainside, a terrific echo to the rifle shot. Down came the slide—gently at first—so far away it was barely discernible; a mass of ice and snow already weakened by early spring thaws and awaiting only some such small shock as the reverberations of a rifle shot to start it.

The slide gathered way. Bristling with root-torn trees it thundered down the slope—directly towards the man.

And now Craven heard it. Bird in one hand, rifle in the other he stared upwards, and such dreadful fear as he had never known filled him. Forgotten was his crime; forgotten was Corporal Brainard; here was real and imminent peril.

Panic-stricken, he turned to run, yelling aloud in his awful terror. He stumbled and fell and then the avalanche was upon him. He was tossed whirling in the air, and fell back into the grinding chaos even as the whole mass roared and thundered its way over the cliff and down, down, down—

He left no trail behind.

In the Mounted Police post at Peel Point, Corporal Brainard was swearing softly as he laboured over his report sheets. Among other items he wrote:—

I also beg to report the death of a man named Jake Dennison (elderly; exact age unknown), who owned and operated a general store

at the settlement known as Carcajou Bend.

On receiving word of this man's death I followed the usual procedure of thorough investigation. The body had been removed to the living-room when I arrived, but my own investigations, coupled with the information given to me by residents who first discovered the death (their signed statements enclosed), caused me to arrive at the following conclusion:—

The deceased, who was both aged and in indifferent health, had been standing or sitting close to the stove in the store, when he either fainted or had a heart seizure. In falling he struck his head heavily against the stove, occasioning a severe head wound that, either in itself was the direct cause of death, or, he may have been dead from heart-failure before striking the stove.

In any event I am satisfied that he was not the victim of foul play, because: (a) he had no known enemies; (b) nothing had been stolen from the store, even though in the safe (which was not locked) was a large sum in currency (enclosed); (c) there was not the slightest evidence of foul play.

I shall have the body properly interred at Carcajou Bend as soon as the frost is out of the ground sufficiently to permit the digging of a grave.

With a sigh of relief the corporal laid down the pen and leaned back in his chair.

"And that," he murmured, "is that. And that report should earn me another stripe. Not one crime committed in my district all this winter."

He knew nothing of the man whose body lay buried beneath tons of debris; the man who had become a victim of panic.

A Northern Skin Game

Which Ended in the "Bracelets" and a Resignation

SERGEANT MARSH, in charge of the R.C.M.P. post at Pine Knoll, read the letter he extracted from the official blue envelope, swore vividly, then handed the epistle to his sole command, Constable Vawn.

"Read that," he said savagely. "Trappers, traders, and even some of the natives are still swamping headquarters at Edmonton with complaints about losing their dogs."

Constable Vawn read the letter. It was curt and to the point.

"In spite of repeated written orders to you to stop the wholesale poisoning and disappearance of valuable sled dogs in your district, I regret to state that fresh complaints arrive by every mail. Failing immediate and satisfactory action upon your part, I shall be compelled to recall you to headquarters and place another officer in charge of the Pine Knoll Post."

The letter was signed by the divisional superintendent.

"Fine for the Super, eh?" Marsh took back the letter from the constable. "It's easy for him to sit back there in a steam-heated office and write a letter bawling me out. Yet"—his eyes grew troubled—"I guess it's coming to me. But I don't like that word 'recall' a bit. Damned if I want to go back outside and just be a dressed-up dummy for tourists to gaze at; I want to stay in the north. Yet—oh, hell!" he finished.



The constable stared at his superior with sympathetic eyes.

"Then I guess it's up to us," he ventured. "But first, Marsh, explain the matter more fully to me. Remember I've only been up here a couple of weeks. Why should anyone poison and steal sled dogs?"

"To make money!" Marsh spat it out, went on: "It's like this, Vawn; in each district up here are a few government-appointed wolf-hunters. Unless the wolves are kept down they destroy or drive away the caribou herds and in consequence the Indians suffer."

"Most of the wolf-hunters are fine chaps; they get a fair monthly wage, a twenty-dollar bounty on every wolf hide they produce, and in addition the pelts are their property to sell for whatever they can get. It's a darned good job and most of the hunters realise that and play the game. But once in a while some tricky fellow gets himself appointed as a government wolf-hunter and, not satisfied with making a

damned good living starts stealing and poisoning dogs. And that makes for trouble all round."

"But a dog isn't a wolf," suggested the constable.

"No? Where's the difference?" Marsh's tone was still savage. "What are wolves but wild huskies. What are huskies but half-tamed wolves. Both wolves and huskies run all shades of colours from tawny to black. I admit that if you put 'em side by side when alive, you could tell the difference between a sled dog and a timber wolf, because the expression in their eyes would be different, the wolf would be more rangy, while the dog would be broader in the chest and muscled more heavily. But, Vawn"—Marsh thumped the table furiously with his fist—"I defy anyone—anyone—to distinguish the difference between a wolf or husky pelt! And that is exactly why a crooked wolf-hunter can get away with it, providing he is not caught in the actual act of skinning a dog. And, damn it! it's well-nigh impossible to catch him in the act."

"Ye Gods!" The constable wagged his head. "Then it's going to be some job to catch this fellow, eh?"

"Yes; especially to get sufficient evidence to convict." Marsh cursed softly, continued: "But, Vawn, we've got to stop this dog-stealing, and at once! Naturally, since this trouble started I have checked up pretty closely on the wolf-hunters in my district and my suspicions have narrowed down to a hunter named Crane. He's a crafty sort of chap; too suave altogether. I never liked him from the first. But suspicion and proof are two different things."

"Yes," Vawn agreed.

"Well," Marsh resumed, his eyes smouldering, "I'm not so anxious to procure evidence that would stand up in court; that would mean tedious court proceedings outside, and all that. I just want to get enough on the guilty party to scare him out of the north.

And, by heaven, I'll do it. I'm not going to let a crooked wolf-hunter get me recalled."

"You have a plan?" asked the constable.

"Well"—the sergeant frowned thoughtfully—"a scheme has been dodging in and out of my head for some time, but it isn't quite hatched. But I think that by to-morrow it will be, as this letter has turned on the heat in my mind." And with that enigmatic remark, for the time being he dropped the subject.

MOSQUIT'S LAST SERVICE



At breakfast the next morning, Sergeant Marsh returned to the dog-stealing matter in a rather round-about way, but he was holding the Super's letter in

his hand.

"Vawn," he said, reaching for more bacon, "when I was out feeding the dogs this morning I examined old Mosqui again. I think the old dog is just about finished. It's almost a year since he did even light work, and it's a cinch he'll never work again, but I have kept putting off destroying him."

"Yet," Vawn replied, "I suppose it would be best to destroy him. He can barely move and is probably in pain from rheumatism. Actually a well-placed bullet would be a kindness."

"Yes, a swift and merciful end," Marsh agreed. "But"—his eyes grew thoughtful—"I think that Mosqui might first do one more bit of useful work for the Force."

"But you just said——" Vawn protested.

"I know." Marsh leaned across the table. "It is all to do with stopping this dog-stealing. Listen." For minutes he spoke rapidly and to the point, and as

he listened the constable's eyes glowed.

"It's a gamble," he said as the sergeant ended.

"Yes." Marsh smiled grimly. "But it's the best scheme I can think of. Now let's get ready and hit the trail."

For two days Sergeant Marsh and Constable Vawn had been on the trail, and the young constable had been initiated into yet one more of the multitudinous duties of members of the Far North detachments of the R.C.M.P.; that of checking-up on the wolf-hunters.

During the two days they had stopped at the cabins of four hunters, and at each cabin Vawn had learned how to check over the wolf hides, sign bounty vouchers for the hunter to forward to the government to receive a cheque in return, and then to take a knife and slit the left ear of each pelt vouched for, to prove that bounty had been paid.

Now the two policemen were on the return journey, with but one more wolf-hunter to visit, the man Crane. As he jogged along behind the cariole, watching Vawn swinging ahead breaking trail, the sergeant occasionally spoke to a passenger on the sled—the aged dog—Mosqui. The fact of a dog riding on the cariole had occasioned no comment from others during the patrol, for it is a common enough occurrence in the north to carry a sick dog on the sled. But had others known the real reason for the old dog's presence, no doubt they would have been highly interested.

For another hour the small cavalcade plugged along and dusk was beginning to settle about the wilderness when Vawn turned and waved. The sergeant stared and saw barely a mile ahead the glow of lights; Crane's cabin. Marsh's lips tightened grimly as they finished the last mile. In his own mind he was convinced that Crane was the man responsible for the dog-stealing; soon he hoped to obtain proof.

As the Mounties pushed open the

door of the cabin and entered in a billow of frost-laden air, a man, busily engaged in scraping a green wolf hide stretched upon one wall, turned to greet them.

"Ha! Glad you've come, Sarge!" He grinned ingratiatingly. "Business is sure rushin'. I've a pile of pelts for you to check over an' vouch for." He indicated a heap of hides in one corner.

"Can't do that to-night," Marsh replied curtly, his eyes on the other man's huge bulk and cunning eyes. "We're heading farther along, but we'll be back about noon to-morrow."

"Hey?" Crane stared. "You won't camp here to-night? Why, it's around thirty below outside and nigh dark. Must be urgent business to cause you to keep on goin'."

"It is." Marsh let his eyes run over the cabin's hide-covered walls, Crane's untidy bunk and the greasy dishes thrown carelessly into a pail. "I'd rather camp out if it was ninety below," was his unspoken thought, then, aloud: "But, Crane, I'd like to leave a dog here overnight. He can't pull his weight and makes a heavy load for the other animals to haul. Is it all right to leave him here?"

"Sure." Crane grinned and nodded. "Bring 'im in an' pitch 'im in a corner."

Nodding to the constable, Marsh led the way outside.

"Well," he whispered, as they picked up the aged Mosqui, "this is the first time you've seen him. What's your impression?"

"Crooked as they make 'em," Vawn replied. "And smug with it. I'm gambling that his greed will prove stronger than his caution. He's cocky, too; thinks now he can get away with anything."

"I hope so," was the grim reply, then in silence the two troopers carried the dog into the cabin.

Again scraping away at the fresh hide, Crane apparently paid but slight attention as they placed the dog in a corner, but a crafty, self-satisfied smile

hovered about his bearded lips, a smile that changed into an outright chuckle as the Mounties turned to leave. Sergeant Marsh caught that chuckle and whispered to himself as they mushed away:

"Smile, Crane, but I think that by to-morrow you'll be smiling on the other side of your face."

THE TRAP



Barely two miles beyond Crane's cabin the policemen made camp. The "urgent business" Marsh had stated compelled them to head on through was

merely to give Crane a few hours to walk into a simple trap. Would the man do so? The insistent question pounded over and over again in the sergeant's head, and he was glad when the new day dawned and he considered it time to return to Crane's shack. It was almost noon when he halted the dogs outside the man's cabin.

"Hal!" Crane flung open the door, stood there grinning as the Mounties came towards him. "Come right in, Sarge, there's nigh thirty pelts to check."

"Thirty more since last month?" The sergeant said it as he peeled off his parka. "You are certainly doing well, Crane; better than all the other hunters put together."

"Aw, them guys!" Crane shrugged contemptuously. "They're content with just a measly livin'. Me, I'm up here to make some money."

"Well, you're making it," was the curt reply, then: "But, Crane"—the sergeant's eyes darted all about the cabin—"where's the dog I left with you?"

"Oh, that animal?" Again Crane shrugged. "Funny thing about that dog, Sarge. He wasn't so sick. I opened the door a whiles after you'd gone an' he ducks right by me, sniffs at your trail, then heads right after you. Why, ain't he with you now?"

"No." A hard gleam showed in the sergeant's eyes, but he forced himself to speak off-handedly. "But a dog running alone doesn't stand much chance; no doubt wolves got him before he could reach us. It doesn't matter, anyway. Let's get busy and check your pelts."

"Okay!" Crane grinned and lifted a pile of hides on to the table, handed the sergeant a skinning-knife. "Go ahead, Sarge."

The tenth pelt was in Sergeant Marsh's fingers when he stiffened suddenly. "This hide is certainly fresh, Crane," he said.

"Got 'im last night after you left," was the grinned reply. "Just a lone old he-wolf. I've laid for 'im for weeks; he was too foxy to eat poisoned bait, but I got 'im last night with a bullet ahind the ear."

"Mighty good shooting." The sergeant examined the head of the pelt more closely, then inserted the knife in the left ear. The point struck something hard. In a tremor of excitement he examined what the knife had struck, his broad back hiding his movements from Crane.

"You say that you shot this animal last night?" he threw over his shoulder.

"Sure!"

"You heard that, Vawn?" The sergeant swung round, the pelt in his hand. The constable nodded, his eyes on the hunter.

"Say"—Crane commenced to bluster—"What'n hell's wrong about shootin' a wolf?"

"Nothing." Marsh's tone was grim. "But it is a serious crime to shoot a sled dog."

"Hey?" Crane started. "What'n hell d'you mean? Are you hintin' that I'm

collectin' wolf bounty on dog pelts?"

"Exactly," Marsh retorted crisply. "That's just what you've been doing."

"Oh yeah?" Crane's lips twisted in a sneer. "Then prove it. I says all them pelts is wolves, not huskies. It'll take a smarter guy than you to prove different."

"Isn't this sufficient proof?" With the words the sergeant parted the fur on the left ear of the pelt he held, disclosing a small, brass tag attached to the skin. On the tag was engraved: "R.C.M.P. 882."

Crane's jaw dropped as he stared.

"882," said the sergeant quietly, "was the official registration number of old Mosqui, the dog I left with you last night and which you mercifully destroyed for me by means of a bullet behind the ear. At least, you relieved me of that painful duty."

"Why, I—I—" spluttered the dumbfounded hunter.

"Didn't know that police dogs were branded any more than privately owned dogs, eh?" Marsh finished for him.

"For the sake of a few more dollars, you walked right into the trap I set for you. I've evidence enough here to——"

"Then drop it!" Quick as a flash Crane whirled and grabbed at a rifle hanging upon the wall.

"Grab him, Vawn!" Dropping the hide he held, Marsh lunged forward. A brief, furious scuffle and then the bracelets were on and Crane slammed into a chair. Panting from his exertions, the sergeant stared down at him.

"Crane," he said sternly, "I've no doubt but you're responsible for all the dog-stealing that's been going on, but I won't lay a charge against you unless you force me to. I've done my job in ending your skin game; now I must rid the north of you."

"Meanin' what?" was the growled question.

"That right here and now you will write out your resignation as a wolf-hunter, pack your things, and inside of twenty-four hours be on your way outside," was the reply. "D'you agree?"

For a long moment Crane stared, then nodded a sullen assent.

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Lame Evidence

*Limping—Left Foot, Right
Foot*



A ROUGH voice raised in song came from out of the snow-filled night.

Sergeant Nolan, of the Mounted, got to his feet and walked to the door. Framed in the glow of the light behind him, he peered out into the storm. Lights glowed faintly through the windows of Carson's store.

As the sergeant stared a man emerged from the building, stood for a moment staring in all directions, then, yelling the words of a ribald song, disappeared into the night.

Sergeant Nolan shook his head as he closed the door.

"Forrest," he murmured, "drunk again. It happens every mail-day, or whenever he has any cash."

He yawned, stretched, glanced at his watch, and decided it was time to turn in.

Dawn was greying the northland, when a heavy pounding upon the door jerked the sergeant from sound sleep to vivid wakefulness. Words shouted from outside brought him to the door on the run. Carson's clerk, the half-breed Joe Marsen, tumbled into the room. His face looked drawn in the light of the lamp Nolan hastily lit.

"It's murder, Sergeant!" the clerk gasped. "Murder and robbery!"

"Who? Where?" Nolan was flinging on clothes as he spoke.

"My boss—Carson! He's lying behind the counter—knifed!"

"What's taken?"

"The trade money! Ten thousand dollars! It came in on the mail yesterday!"

"What else?" Nolan was almost dressed.

"I went to bed early because I had to mush to the Dogrib's camp at Big Lake with that money to-day. I sleep over the store. Only that man Forrest, and my boss were in the store. Forrest was drinking and singing and shouting. I got up early this morning. Lights still on in the store. Found old man dead. Looks like Forrest did it."

"Why?"

"Come and see."

The two men hastened to the store.

Silently Sergeant Nolan, watched anxiously by Meeswah, the dead man's squaw, her pretty, big-eyed, grown daughter Marie, and by the clerk, stared at the interior of Carson's store.

"You have touched nothing?" asked Nolan.

The squaw shook her head.

"No. Me wait for you to come like Joe said." She ended with a wail of grief, and the girl slipped an arm about her.

"M'm!"

Slowly Nolan advanced toward the body. Gingerly he examined it. A thin-bladed knife with a carved ivory handle had been driven into the dead man's heart. Extracting it, the sergeant looked up at Joe Marsen.

"This is what you meant? You've seen this knife before?"

"Sure!" Marsen's eyes gleamed. "So've you. It's Forrest's."

"Yes."

Getting to his feet the sergeant stood tugging thoughtfully at one ear. Forrest! No one knew much about

him. He had arrived in a canoe the summer before. An educated man with the ear-marks of an ex-soldier about him. And Nolan suspected that his decided lameness was the result of an old wound.

But Forrest never talked about himself. Not even when in his cups—and he got drunk whenever his funds permitted his purchasing drink from some moonshiner or other. Always he drank heavily on the once-monthly mail-day, when he received money from somewhere.

Forrest! Nolan had never bothered much with him. Many such lonely and forsaken men roamed the posts and settlements of the Far North. But now— The clerk had said Forrest had been in the store the night before. The sergeant himself had seen a man who walked with a decided limp leaving the building. And here was Forrest's knife.

With a curt command to Marsen to come with him, Nolan led the way to Forrest's shack.

"I WANT TO TALK TO YOU"

A wave of warm air greeted the sergeant as, with the clerk crowding eagerly on his heels, he entered Forrest's cabin. A log glowed in the sheet-iron stove. From the one bunk came the sound of heavy breathing. Nolan quickly lighted the lamp, then jerked the sleeper into wakefulness.

"What the——" Forrest sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"Want to talk to you!" Nolan's tone was stern. "Dress, and come along to my post!"

In the post Nolan seated himself across the table from the suspect.

"Forrest, what time did you go to bed last night?" was his first sharp question.

"Eh?" A thin smile twisted Forrest's lips. "Just before dark, Sergeant. It was mail-day. I was in funds, and drank a lot. Why?"

Nolan's eyes hardened.

"Better be more exact, Forrest. I myself saw you leave Carson's store after ten o'clock last night. You were drunk, and singing. In fact, it was your yelling caused me to look out."

"Wrong!" Forrest shook his head.

"You are the only lame man around here," was the curt reply. "I could not see your face, but the man I saw was both lame and seemed to be intoxicated."

"Seems to fit me—eh?" Again that thin smile twisted Forrest's lips. "But I repeat, Sergeant, it wasn't me."

"Then explain this!" The sergeant suddenly flashed the thin-bladed knife before Forrest's eyes. "Yours, isn't it?"

"Ye-es." It came slowly as Forrest stiffened in his seat. "Where did you find it?"

Sergeant Nolan's face grew chill and bleak.

"Sticking in the heart of a dead man," he said. "Carson was murdered last night, and ten thousand dollars in cash stolen!"

"Good Lord!" Forrest started violently. "So you think, Sergeant— Good God, man! Surely you don't think I did it?"

"What else can I think?" Nolan was finding it hard to go on. After all, apart from his weakness for drink, Forrest was one of his own kind. "The evidence is here, isn't it? You admit this is your knife? Last night I saw a man who limped badly leaving Carson's store. You can offer but one explanation—your unsupported word that you went to bed before dark."

"And your evidence is equally lame," Forrest said stiffly. "I lost that knife last week."

"Any proof?"

"No. But, Sergeant, d'you think I'd be foolish enough to leave evidence like my knife behind if I were guilty?"

"A man under the influence of liquor might, yes," was the stern reply. "And you admit you were drinking yester-

day. I must arrest you and charge you with this crime. Will you show me where you hid the cash, or must I search?"

"I am innocent," was the quiet reply.

"Very well." Nolan got to his feet. "I must lock you in the cell, then search for the money. To-morrow morning we start for the outside. I shall take Marsen along as chief witness. Any defence witness you want to bring along?"

"No." Then, surprisingly, Forrest added: "Who will run the store while Marsen is away?"

"Eh?" Nolan started. "Why, the girl and her mother, of course."

"I see." Forrest's lips twisted. "Soft for Joe Marsen, though, eh? I'll probably be convicted. He'll return, marry the girl, and be set up as a prosperous trader."

"Trying to put it on to Marsen?" asked Nolan. "Suggesting he killed Carson?"

Forrest shrugged.

"You say Carson has been murdered. Someone killed him. I did not."

BREAKING THE TRAIL



Dawn found Marsen breaking trail ahead of the police team, and Forrest limping along behind the sled. Sergeant Nolan, a carbine in the crook of his arm, brought up the rear of the procession. The sergeant was both puzzled and disappointed. An all-day search had failed to find the trade money. And Forrest's manner troubled him. The man did not seem to care whether he was hanged or not, yet his bearing was that of an innocent man.

For the hundredth time Nolan

conned it over. The evidence of himself and Marsen, and also the knife. To offset this was but the unsupported word of Forrest that he had got drunk and flopped on his bunk before dark. The motive! Nolan shrugged as he trudged along. Ten thousand dollars was motive enough, but where had Forrest concealed the money?

Well, perhaps that matter would be cleared up all in good time. Trial and conviction on the evidence on hand would, no doubt, later bring a confession in order to escape the extreme penalty. Anyway, he had done the right thing in arresting Forrest.

Nolan glanced at Forrest. The man limped badly. In spite of the cold, sweat showed on his face. This musing must be hard on him. Yet his limp was in itself evidence. Lame evidence! Nolan smiled grimly as he recalled Forrest's own term. Well, in a few days they would know what a judge and jury thought of the evidence.

For four days the little cavalcade had been on the trail; long, wearisome days. Now, on mid-afternoon of the fourth day, Sergeant Nolan was searching the river ahead for a good place to camp, when there came a sudden cry from Marsen, breaking trail ahead. The breed was prone in the snow. Nolan ran forward.

"What happened?" The sergeant rapped it out as he helped the man to his feet.

"Thong of snow-shoe snapped." Marsen's face was twisted with pain. "Hell!" He cursed as he tried to walk. "I think I've twisted my ankle." He sat down, rubbing at his ankle.

"That's bad." Nolan looked down at the man. "That means Forrest will have to relieve me trail breaking. Hard on a lame man."

"I can do it, Sergeant." Forrest had arrived with the team. "Guess Marsen can mush along behind the sled all right."

"Okay," Nolan agreed, his eyes worried. "Get going." He again fol-

lowed the procession; Forrest ahead, limping badly on his right leg, Marsen hanging on to the sled handle and limping with his left. Two lame men. Nolan wondered grimly if the old rule of three would hold good and he would become the third.

The next morning his mental query was answered.

The day was fine and clear and the going easier. He was ahead breaking trail, whilst Marsen and Forrest took turns at riding. Suddenly a flock of ptarmigan whirred across the river. Fresh meat! Nolan raised his carbine. Before he could fire a shot cracked out. An agonising pain shot through his right thigh. He crumpled to the snow.

"Hurt bad, Sergeant?" Marsen was bending over him. "I grabbed my rifle when I saw the birds and it went off."

"Thigh bone's smashed, I think," said Nolan through gritted teeth. And then all went black.

It was Forrest who took command.

"Get him to the bank. I'll get a fire going."

"You order me?" flared the breed.

Forrest did not wait to argue. Limping to the shore, he got a fire going. As soon as Marsen arrived with the team and wounded man, Forrest slit the unconscious sergeant's breeches leg. The bullet had made an ugly wound. Forrest rapped out more orders. Sullenly the breed filled a blackened pot with snow and placed it on the fire, then began to unpack the sled. He slammed the first-aid kit beside Forrest.

"A few inches higher, Marsen, and it would have gone through his body," Forrest said quietly as he got to his feet after dressing the wound.

"What you mean? It was accident!" Marsen cursed.

"Ten thousand dollars. A store—and Marie. I wonder!" said Forrest.

"What you mean?" Marsen lunged forward, but a groan from Nolan halted him.

"Brandy!" the sergeant whispered.

"Where?" Forrest's eyes gleamed. For a moment the sergeant hesitated.

"In my kit-bag."

Fumbling in the bag, Forrest produced the bottle. In seconds he had pulled the cork and held the bottle to the wounded man's lips. Nolan sipped gratefully, then watched anxiously as Forrest replaced the bottle.

"Put you on your honour," he whispered. "Might need all of that."

"I shall not touch," Forrest said quietly, then made the sergeant comfortable for the night. At intervals during the dark hours he attended to the wounded man and replenished the fire. Sometimes he administered a few drops of brandy, but he did not take a sip himself.

By morning Sergeant Nolan was in the throes of fever.

"You two do your best," he whispered during one sensible interval, adding: "Good chance for you to cut and run, Forrest."

"Where?" asked Forrest. "And why? Besides," he added, "if I left you in your present condition I should feel like a murderer. At the moment I am not."

"I hope you are right," groaned Nolan, thankful for the care he was receiving. "But there is the evidence."

Forrest's reply was his thin smile. Turning away, he helped Marsen to break camp.

ONE LONG NIGHTMARE

To Nolan the day was one long nightmare. In spite of the careful ministrations of Forrest, his leg throbbed and burned badly. Forrest was undoubtedly finding the going hard, but Marsen's ankle seemed better for the night's rest.

And now, towards late afternoon, they were approaching a part of the frozen river spattered with air-holes made by underground springs. To all appearances the ice was safe enough,

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but had he not been wounded Nolan would have ordered a portage through the bush past the bad section. As it was, they must risk the ice passage. He called to Marsen.

"Get well ahead and test the ice, then signal."

The breed nodded and mushed ahead. From a half-mile distant he waved. Forrest clucked to the dogs. For a moment the sagacious brutes hesitated, then flung themselves into their breast-straps.

Half-way towards Marsen the lead dog sensed danger and plunged sideways. His team-mates tried to follow. Too late! The ice sagged and great cracks appeared. The sled commenced to sink. Through clenched teeth Nolan called:

"Cut loose the dogs! Give them a chance! Look out for yourself, Forrest!"

Forrest lunged forward, the water surging to his waist as the ice gave. Desperately he slashed free the struggling animals—too late to save them. In a tangle of harness and futile struggles they were swept down and under the ice.

Forrest swung back to the sled, held against the ice by the rush of water. With a tremendous effort he lifted Nolan in his arms and commenced to stagger towards the shore. The ice writhed and twisted, but held.

"Start a fire—quick!" Forrest gasped to the breed, now on the bank ahead of him. Instead, cursing wildly, the clerk turned and ran into the timber.

And now Forrest's wet clothing was freezing. In a few minutes he would be encased in an armour of ice. Dropping the sergeant, he lurched forward, found a dead birch, crushed it to tinder with his feet. Somehow he found his waterproof match-box and struck a tiny flame. The dry wood caught at once. Heaping more fuel about the flame, Forrest commenced to strip off his sodden footgear and clothing; to rub

vigorously the white patches of frost-bite already showing on his feet.

"Good work, Forrest!" Sergeant Nolan said two hours later as, with a good meal inside them, both men lay close to a roaring fire. With infinite caution and many trips Forrest had unloaded the sled and packed their stuff ashore, and then dragged to shore the empty sled.

Forrest looked up as the sergeant spoke.

"But what are we to do now?" he asked. "Still two days' travel ahead of us, and no dogs. I can't carry you or drag you on the sled single-handed."

"Maybe Marsen will be back," comforted the sergeant. "Perhaps he just lost his head for the time being."

"Perhaps." Forrest smiled grimly. "Like he lost his head when he shot you, and when he signalled to us to drive ahead over rotten ice."

Nolan pondered this for a while, then he said:

"I will not ask you to do it, Forrest, knowing what awaits you at the end. But you could go for help. I could camp here."

"No." Forrest shook his head. "Listen!" He held up a hand. The mournful howling of wolves sobbed through the trees. "What would those brutes do to you if I left you?" he asked.

"I can shoot."

"You have been delirious on and off ever since you were hurt," Forrest reminded. "They'd get you in one of your feverish comas."

Nolan had to agree. A man on his feet and able to shoot had little to fear from the wolves, but a sick and unconscious man—He shuddered at the mental picture the thought conjured up. Well, perhaps daylight would offer some solution, but now he was tired. In spite of the pain of his wounded leg, he slept.

For long after that Forrest sat staring into the fire. Once or twice he approached the sleeping sergeant and

IF I DIE BEFORE I WAKE

by R. Sherwood King

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made certain he was warm and comfortable. Presently, with Nolan's service revolver by his side, he crawled into his own sleeping-bag, but he did not sleep. Marsen might return—in fact, was certain to—as, unarmed and without food or blankets, he would not dare to go far.

An hour later the breed did return—so silently that he had leaped from the shadows and had Forrest pinned down before he could move. Marsen's face showed cruel, sneering; a hunting-knife gleamed in his right hand.

"Now, Mr. Forrest," he gloated, "I not like what you said about the girl and the store. I want them—yes. But I not heap fool like you. I kill you and the sergeant, but I report you killed the policeman and then I kill you. Maybe they find what the wolves leave of you both—maybe not."

Forrest did not reply. The breed's knees and the folds of the sleeping-bag had his arms pinioned. He did all he could do—pressed the trigger of the revolver beneath the robes; at the same time he heaved himself upright.

The surprise was complete. The muffled roar of the shot, the sudden heave, sent Marsen rolling into the hot embers of the fire. With a yell the clerk was on his feet even as Forrest clinched with him.

Revolver and knife went hurtling to the snow as the two men struggled, the breed panting threats and curses, Forrest battling silently and grimly. Neither of them heard the aroused Nolan's command to stop, or saw the levelled carbine.

Twice they rolled through the remains of the fire, and the clerk's hand encountered the heavy frying-pan. He smashed it into Forrest's face. The terrific impact sent Forrest back on his heels. Marsen leaped for the revolver. Forrest rolled to one side just in time as the heavy gun roared. The breed backed away to fire again—stepped close to Nolan. The sergeant acted. With one movement he had twisted the

barrel of the carbine between Marsen's legs, and as the clerk crashed to the snow ordered afresh:

"Stop it—and explain!"

"He tried to knife me!" Forrest panted.

"A lie! A lie!" Marsen contradicted. "He was going to kill you, Sergeant. I stopped him. Then he tried to kill me!"

"I see." Nolan gestured to them to rebuild the fire; eyed them both in the light of the leaping flames. "But why did you run away, Marsen?"

"I think maybe I find a trapper's cabin, or Indian camp."

"M'm!" Nolan's eyes were hard. Two lame men, no dogs, and himself unable to walk. And the two lame men were now deadly enemies. There was but one thing to do. He voiced his decision.

"We will cache most of our gear here. You two will pull me along. No more camping; only short rests. We should reach headquarters by tomorrow night."

The breed protested.

"We can't do it, Sergeant. We both lame—you heavy man. I go for help. Much better!"

"You'll obey my orders!" Nolan's tone was firm. "Give me all the weapons, Forrest."

As Forrest obeyed and tucked them into his robes, the sergeant whispered:

"Why do you do it? Why not run for it?"

The thin smile twisted Forrest's lips.

"Death isn't so frightening, Nolan. Other things are worse—such as deserting a wounded man."

Nolan did not reply. Something rose in his throat. To think he was taking Forrest in to face a charge of murder and robbery!

Noon found the little party within a few miles of their destination. Hour after hour, during his lucid intervals, Nolan had watched the two men labouring at the ropes galling their chests. Each lurch of the sled sent

agonising twinges through his wounded thigh, but he bit back the groans that rose to his lips. And to physical pain was added mental torture as he watched Forrest.

"Great heavens above!" Suddenly it burst from him as he watched, and his mind cast back to the night of the murder. For the next hour of agonising, laborious travel he forced himself to concentrate upon each tiny detail since that night; every word uttered by the men pulling ahead. Every action.

"By all that's wonderful!" he whispered. "They say pain either clears or clouds the mind. Thank the Lord it has cleared mine in time!"

JOURNEY'S END

Shouts, the yelping of dogs, the tinkling of sleigh bells roused Sergeant Nolan from a doze. Opening his eyes, he saw the buildings of the small settlement at the rail-head. A team of huskies with two members of the Mounted running ahead and behind was racing along to meet them. As they drew abreast the sergeant painfully sat up.

"Corbett! McMillan!" He shook hands with his comrades, then rapidly explained. Marsen and Forrest looked on.

"Murder and robbery, eh? And you

crocked up!" Sergeant Corbett commented. "Come here!" he called to the two civilians. Slipping off the breastropes, the men approached. "Now, Nolan!" Corbett again addressed the wounded man.

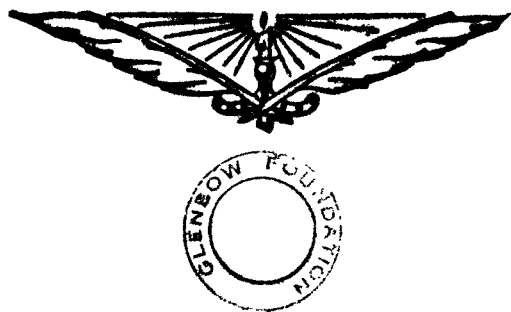
"Joe Marsen!" Nolan eyed the breed steadily. "Be very careful what you say in the presence of witnesses. You know all about the killing of Carson. I know you killed him."

"What you mean?" Marsen's eyes darted in all directions, but he was hemmed in.

"Just this," said Nolan quietly. "Watching you two pulling me along, I noticed that Forrest limps with his right foot. The man I saw leaving Carson's store on the night of the murder made a bad mistake. He limped with his left foot! That could be nobody but you. Anything to say before—— Grab him!" The last two words were a shout as Marsen whirled suddenly and started to run. "That clinches it," Nolan added, as the other two policemen overpowered the clerk and slipped on the handcuffs.

Breathing quickly, Sergeant Nolan turned to Forrest and held out his hand.

"Thank the Lord things came out right," he said as they gripped. "I owe you a lot, Forrest, and I'm more glad than I can say that I've cleared you—with lame evidence."



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